

空ろの箱と 零のマジック

御影瑛路

イラスト・鉄雄

Eiji Mikage



空ろの箱と 零のマリア5


The Wish-Crushing Cinema

A 'box' with a single purpose: crushing Daiya's 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' by attacking his mind via movie screenings.

Once captured by the cinema, it is absolutely impossible to escape.

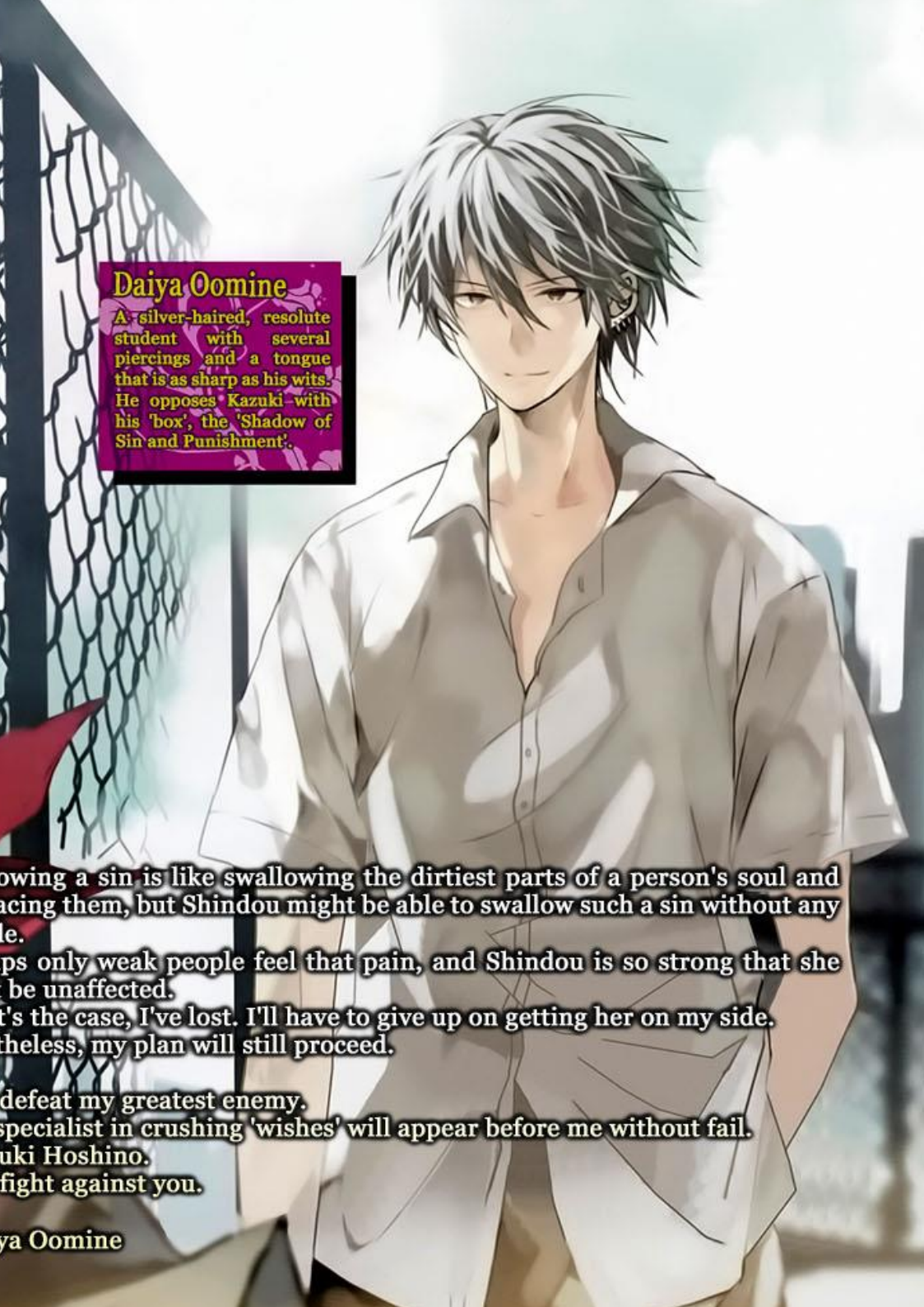
EIJI MIKAGE

Illustrations: Tetsuo

A detailed illustration of a young woman with long, dark, wavy hair, wearing a white short-sleeved shirt with a dark red neckerchief and a dark armband. She is standing in front of a chain-link fence, looking slightly to the right with a gentle smile.

Iroha Shindou

A brilliant girl who is the ace of the athletics club and student council president. During the 'Game of Idleness,' she made full use of her outstanding skills.

A detailed illustration of a young man with short, silver hair, wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved button-down shirt. He is standing in front of a chain-link fence, looking directly at the viewer with a neutral expression.

Daiya Oomine

A silver-haired, resolute student with several piercings and a tongue that is as sharp as his wits. He opposes Kazuki with his 'box', the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment'.

Swallowing a sin is like swallowing the dirtiest parts of a person's soul and embracing them, but Shindou might be able to swallow such a sin without any trouble.

Perhaps only weak people feel that pain, and Shindou is so strong that she might be unaffected.

If that's the case, I've lost. I'll have to give up on getting her on my side. Nonetheless, my plan will still proceed.

I will defeat my greatest enemy.

That specialist in crushing 'wishes' will appear before me without fail.

—Kazuki Hoshino.

I will fight against you.

—Daiya Oomine

A
An artificial personality that belongs to the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema,' the 'box' intended to destroy Daiya's 'box'. She acts as a guide as the movies are being screened.

My name is 'A' and I am the guide to this cinema. This place has but one purpose: crushing your 'box'. The slate of movies—

- 'Close-Up Goodbye'
- '60 Feet and 6 Inches Apart'
- 'Repeat, Reset, Reset'
- 'Piercing at Fifteen'

—is intended to make you abandon your 'wish'. You seem doubtful, Mr. Oomine, but I can assure you that such doubts are misplaced.

—'A'



Maria Otonashi

A resolute beauty who pursues 'O', the distributor of the 'boxes'. Her extreme idealism prevents her from hurting others. She is the one person who Kazuki wants to protect at any cost.

Daiya might be trying to destroy the world with his 'box'.
And if he uses a 'box', he will definitely get Maria involved.

—I won't let that happen. No matter what.
I have to stop Daiya. Therefore—
Even if I have to obtain and use a 'box', I don't care anymore.
Let the clash of 'box' versus 'box' begin.
A clash of my 'wish' to crush the 'boxes' versus Daiya's 'wish'.
I don't know what Daiya's 'wish' is. But it's definitely something he will fight for with no holds barred.
But whatever it is—
I have come to a resolution.
I will fight against Daiya.

Kazuki Hoshino

A completely ordinary student who is abnormally fond of his everyday life; he has become an object of observation for 'O'. He opposes Daiya with the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema.'

—Kazuki Hoshino



The Shadow of Sin and Punishment

Activates as soon as targets step on the shadow of the user of the 'box'—Daiya—and brings the targets under his control by forcing them to relive the remorse deeply rooted in their psyches.

I was never supposed to encounter 'O'. I'm a completely ordinary person who can't even fulfill his own wishes, let alone someone else's.

The supernatural being before me is only interested in Kazu. In his (or her) eyes, I'm just a human who's close to Kazu. I was only able to obtain this power because he (she) is trying to interfere with Kazu by influencing his environment.

Clinging to the 'box' I received so arbitrarily, I'm like a beggar frantically rifling through a garbage bin, desperate to find just enough food to get by.

Even so, I've decided to rely on this 'box'.

'O' watches me with a charming smile on his (her) face.

"'O', there's something that I fail to understand. I admit that Kazu is someone special. I also get why you would want to observe him. I just don't get why a superior being would care so much about a single human."

"What makes you wonder?"

"Well, I think your actions are strange for a being of such power. Simply by singling Kazu out, tailing him, revealing your intentions, you're lowering yourself to the level of a mere human."

"Is there a problem with that? Worship is of no consequence to me, so I'm fine with interacting with Kazuki-kun this way. First off, just by appearing before you and conversing like this, I inevitably lose some of my distance from humanity."

"What do you mean?"

"If I wanted to remain transcendental, I could easily display my power without saying a single word. After all, the mere act of making my reasons and intentions clear renders me less remote. Every word I speak brings me closer to the normal world."

After giving me this explanation, 'O' asks me softly:

"I wonder: do you wish I were supernatural? Perhaps you fear that your 'box' might lose its powers if the nature of the entity that grants your wish turns out to be such a cheap trick? If so, I'm sorry that I'm not what you're looking for."

"Then what are you? If you're not a god, what else could you be?"

With no hesitation whatsoever, 'O' tells me what he (she) is:

"A direction called 'O'."

I fail to comprehend his (her) straightforward answer.

"A direction? What are you talking about?"

"You've only come in contact with a small part of my entire being. 'O' refers to a fraction of the giant entity that 'I' am."

Hearing about an 'O' who's not 'O' all of a sudden leaves me bewildered.

"...Does that mean that you're like the arms and legs on a human body?"

"Not quite. Hm... let's take a large pool as an example. Pretend that the water is 'me'. Now take a cup and scoop some of the water into it. That's 'O'. The cup that's used to shape me is the direction known as 'O'."

"...What do you mean by direction?"

"As the giant being, 'I' do not have a will per se. Well, strictly speaking, 'I' do have a will, but you wouldn't be able to tell the difference. Therefore, 'I' did not originally have a vector. But once some part of the being takes on the name 'O', that part also takes on a special meaning. It's only natural that this creates a 'direction'."

"So that 'direction' is the reason you devote yourself to Kazu?"

"Exactly. I knew you'd be quick on the uptake."

This wasn't praise - 'O' was clearly mocking me.

'O' continues making fun of me:

"But because you're so quick on the uptake, you cannot control your 'box'."

I bite my lip. While I'm aware of my own shortcomings, having 'O' point them out so bluntly is hard to swallow.

"You are unable to perceive the 'box' as the 'box' that it is. In order to make it something that you can understand, you distort it through your own filter. What you think a 'box' is, is in fact something completely different. Ah, one more thing! You seem to think that I'm not interested in you at all, but you're mistaken. In contrast to Kazuki-kun, who has the ability to fully utilize a 'box', you fall short to a ridiculous extent. In a certain way, that makes you a very interesting fellow, too," 'O' says with another charming smile. "I'm sure that you'll be the first to understand my true nature."

Shut up already!

If 'O' keeps giving me hints, I might be able to deduce who he (she) really is.

Sure, 'O' can change his (or her) appearance at will. I have no idea what he (she) really looks like. I don't even know if 'O' is male or female.

But I do have a talent for seeing through deception and getting to the true nature of things. I've got too much brainpower in that area.

If I fully understand 'O', I will render myself unable to believe in the supernatural powers of my 'box'. I am only able to use those special powers *because* 'O' is a mysterious entity.

Therefore, I won't distort 'O' with my interpretations.

I will admire and worship him.

By keeping my gaze averted from reality, I'll fulfill my wish.



Before The Show Begins

Please Turn Off Your Cell Phone

"I was really shocked, yes. ...Yes. Yes. Of course I had heard of the 'Dog Humans,' but you know, I dismissed it as one of those things on TV. I never dreamed that a 'Dog Human' would show up in my own backyard!"

The LCD television is showing a woman whose face is obscured by a mosaic. The middle-aged housewife's voice has been electronically distorted, but her disgusted tone comes through loud and clear.

"What kind of person was X (name erased by an artificial sound)?"

"Mh... pretty normal, in fact. But he was definitely very quiet. When you greeted him, he would always mumble so quietly that you couldn't tell if he was answering or not!"

"Has he done anything that caught your attention?"

"...Well, yes. Lately, or rather, when his parents disappeared... what do they call those people? Shut-ins? I think he secluded himself at home. What he did for a living? ...Who knows? I have no idea."

"Could you elaborate on the disappearance of his parents?"

"Yes. ...Ah, but I should mention that his parents might have moved away without him. I just heard a rumor that they disappeared. I don't know any details. X was never on good terms with his neighbors."

"I see... Do you know what trait all the 'Dog Humans' share?"

The middle-aged woman is clearly taken aback.

"...Yes. They're all criminals, right? And their crimes tend to be rather serious."

"X's criminal record is unknown at this point, but do you..."

"I merely spotted X on all fours barking, that's all. I'm afraid I have nothing more to—"

The middle-aged woman probably ran out of useful information: the camera cut back to the studio and zoomed in on the moderator and a few commentators.

No one seemed to know whether to discuss this phenomenon in a serious or a joking manner. The participants' awkward attempts at commenting on this utterly mysterious incident were just ambiguous nonsense.

I shift my position on my bed and smile scornfully.

Just as I planned, the variety shows have started to cover the "Dog Humans" every day.

When a person suddenly loses his ability to speak and starts crawling about on all fours for no explicable reason - that's the "Dog Human" phenomenon. No variety show would want to miss out on such a sensational topic.

But no matter how much attention the topic gets, the underlying cause won't come to light. Many doctors and scientists are trying to get to the bottom of the "Dog Human" phenomenon, but regardless of their approach, they'll never discover that a 'box' is the cause.

Thus, the commentators inevitably disappoint the audience with trite conclusions like "they are just acting" or "they talk themselves into believing that they are dogs" or "it's a mental illness." Even the fishy psychic, who was probably added to the panel just for laughs, managed to do more for the audience by saying that "God has inflicted this on us as a trial for the conceited human race, in order to teach us that we are merely animals."

Heh.

That's such bullshit.

If you're discussing "conceitedness," then the idea that God would bother to put us on trial is far more conceited. I mean, do humans care if vermin are conceited?

Only a human could come up with something as absurd as creating "Dog Humans."

Just as I turned back to the TV, the moderator concluded today's "Dog Human" special report with some empty words.

"We hope with all our hearts that he will recover soon."

"We hope he will recover soon," huh?

The moderator won't be able to say that for much longer.

"X" aka "Katsuya Tamura" is really a criminal who has killed his parents - but his criminal acts are concealed from the public for now. Once his actions are revealed, that moderator won't be able to casually wish for his recovery anymore.

Right now, only Katsuya Tamura and I know about his crimes, but before long, everyone else will find out.

Public opinion can't ignore the fact that every "Dog Human" so far has turned out to be a felon, and the police can't ignore public opinion. So, the

police will find some pretext to investigate, and will soon discover the bones of Katsuya Tamura's parents in his garden.

And then Katsuya Tamura will go where he belongs: to prison. No... perhaps he'll be sent elsewhere because of his mental problems, but that's besides the point. My goal isn't to punish criminals who would otherwise remain at liberty.

If the Katsuya Tamura incident goes according to plan... then I won't have to make any more preparations. The power of my 'box' can actually make anyone into a "Dog Human" - I deliberately use my power to find people who have committed crimes and only transform those criminals.

I do so in order to force public perception to equate "Dog Human" with "criminal."

"A mutt on four legs is a criminal."

Once that association spreads, "Dog Humans" will automatically be treated as lawbreakers.

What will be the consequences of my experiment in social engineering?

Being a "Dog Human" is as miserable as it gets. Everyone is disgusted by the sight of "Dog Humans" losing their senses, crawling naked on the ground, and barking. No one will pity them since they're not considered human anymore-especially because everyone will believe all "Dog Humans" are criminal scum.

Everyone will fear becoming a "Dog Human."

The public will realize that committing crimes might turn them into "Dog Humans." But without knowing exactly what causes the transformation, people will have no choice but to avoid criminal activity, and live perfectly innocent lives in order to avoid becoming the target of public scorn.

This will put a stop to crime.

Of course the absolute number of "Dog Humans" is totally insufficient. It is necessary to make people believe that criminals become "Dog Humans" with a probability bordering on certainty. In order to accomplish this, I will need to create more "Dog Humans" - legions of them.

Once my task is done, no one will be able to ignore this phenomenon anymore.

I focus on the TV once again.

The topic has changed and a new video has appeared on the screen. Some pedestrian probably used his smart phone to record it: the picture is blurry and the surprised voice of the video-taker can be heard in the background.

I can see the main street of the Kabukichou district in Shinjuku, where dozens of adult men and women have thrown themselves to the ground.

It's impossible to determine what kind of group they belong to at first glance because the men and women seem to have absolutely nothing in common: there are yakuza, office workers, transsexuals, regular women, and so on.

They're gathered around a single individual, and they throw themselves to the ground before him with tears in their eyes.

The camera captures the person standing in their midst - a young man with silver hair and pierced ears who is looking down at the people around him with cold eyes.

Naturally that's me, Daiya Oomine.

"—Hmph."

Again, events are proceeding according to my plans. I was sure that someone would film it if I set up such a performance on a major street, now that camera phones are ubiquitous.

I even planned for the event to end up on TV.

The commentators at the studio frown at the video and make assumptions that totally miss the mark, like "is this some new cult?"

The truth is something entirely different, of course.

I created the "Dog Human" phenomenon and the collective genuflection with my powers.

No one at the studio has linked these two events yet, but there will be people who will associate these two sensational incidents due to their simultaneous occurrence. People on the web have started to suspect some kind of relation between the two without giving it much thought, but they are actually on the right track.

That video is a precursor to my ultimate goals.

Once society can no longer ignore the "Dog Human" phenomenon, I'll teach the masses just who it is that stands in their midst.

And at that point, my plan will start in earnest.

I leave the business hotel and walk along the streets of Shinjuku.

It's Sunday afternoon. Crowded. Unable to stand this huge mass of people, I'm struck by a dizzy spell.

I know by now that most people are sinners. My 'box' has forced me to come to the conclusion that legions of people are hiding polluted sludge within their bodies.

By now, a crowd like this feels no different than a wriggling garbage sack to me.

...Well, I've gotten used to that, too.

It's already September, but the temperature shows no sign of declining, making it as hot as it was during the middle of summer. I look at my watch. It's 2 p.m.

As the sun moves across the sky, my shadow slowly lengthens.

One after another, the people around me tread on the shadow that I've cast.

Which automatically activates my 'box'.

Every time someone walks into my shadow, my body gets penetrated by sins. Sins, sins, sins.

"....."

When I first started using my 'box', I was unable to remain standing. But by now, it's just a matter of routine. I'm no longer the man who broke under that disgusting feeling. I have already prevailed over my weakness.

This is just an unpleasant chore.

"Ugh!"

The ugliness that I'm feeling is just too much - I have to cry out.

What the fuck is this? What is this repulsive feeling, like someone threw vomit, foul salad oil and insect larvae into a blender and made me drink the results?

What kind of human scum bears such a horrible sin?

I rub my temples and turn to the person standing in my shadow so I can look him in the face.

"....."

What a surprise.

Turns out it's a middle school girl with a black bob cut who could be best described as naive-looking. Even though it's the weekend, she's wearing her school uniform. Her pure looks are the opposite of a sinner's. In fact, she seems too pure to be part of this city's madding crowd.

Having heard my groan and seeing my contorted face, she gives me a suspicious glance. ...Tch, who do you think is to blame for this?

Our eyes meet, but she just tries to pass me by.

"Give up on your revenge. I pity you, but you reap what you sow."

The girl stops and turns to me. The reason for her lack of expression is probably that she has yet to realize the situation that she's in.

"You may want to punish wrongdoers, but the guys who pay for your body aren't the same as the guy who gave you AIDS. Nor are they somehow in cahoots. Their sins certainly aren't as grave as what you plan to do to them. I guess you don't agree with me, though."

Her eyes start to show some confusion, but she otherwise remains poker-faced. Maybe she's not good at expressing herself...

"So stop selling your body and spreading HIV."

With an utterly deadpan look on her face, she opens her mouth.

"...Please don't say such nonsense in public."

She speaks at last. I have to strain to hear her frail voice. Looks like she's also not very energetic.

"Don't worry! Look, there's no one paying any attention to us. You'd go nuts if you had to pay attention to every single person you pass on the street. This bunch wouldn't care if a wanted criminal were strolling by."

Well, it'd be an entirely different story though if someone started to act like a dog...

"How can you know what I'm doing...?"

"I don't. I merely sensed your reeking sin."

Her somewhat lifeless expression starts to change. Most likely she wanted to frown, but because she's so bad at expressing herself, she just squints a bit.

She turns away from me and dashes off. Looks like she's finally trying to escape.

"You can't escape. You're already under my control."

I close my eyes.

I close my vision. I close myself.

Back when she stepped into my shadow, I absorbed her sin. I now reach into the depths of my heart and grope for it.

A numbing pain pierces my innards.

While enduring this pain, I search within my mind for her specific thoughts. The dirty jumble of countless others' repulsive thoughts that are in my head, makes me want to hold my nose even when there's no physical stench. I imagine the contents of a witch's cauldron filled with poisonous plants and lizards.

The pain I feel is most likely a mere illusion: it's just my heart cringing. My heart is struggling with all its might against touching such filth, and causing me pain as a result. Hell, it's like a host of tapeworms squirming inside me.

While resisting the waves of disgust, I finally find her thoughts among all the others that I hold in my head. They resemble a "shadow."

Each of these shadow-like thoughts is someone's sin.

Reaching even deeper into this repulsive cauldron——I grab her shadow.

"Uh, ah...!"

Several meters from me, the middle schooler crouches down.

I've finished taking control.

I open my eyes.

I try to forcefully suppress the numbness within me by pressing my hand hard against my chest, and slowly approach her.

"Ah, aaaaahaaaaah!" she cries and convulses in pain.

Her response draws the attention of the people around us, but no one is willing to help her out. Everyone is either just ignoring her or watching helplessly.

"This distress is merely the result of your being directly confronted by your sins. You realize that, right?"

Without saying a word, she continues to cry.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to turn you into a "Dog Human." Only those who have escaped from their responsibilities by turning off their brains and no longer retain any feelings of guilt - are the real scum who are lower than mutts. That doesn't apply to you. You are suffering. You have just become desperate. This means that you still have a chance for growth. But I think you need to be monitored. Therefore——"

I throw the shadow of her sin into my mouth.

"—become a slave of your sin."

An incredible bitterness spreads in my mouth.

By doing so, I have subjugated her.

The 'box' I obtained: the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment'.

In a nutshell, the power of my 'box' uses the feelings of guilt deep inside the target to bring him or her under my control.

But I have imposed additional conditions upon myself. In order to control someone, I have to directly confront their sins. This essentially means that I have to look at the ugliest parts of people's souls. For example, the middle school girl before me caught HIV due to prostitution and despaired. As revenge, she has been selling her body to infect the men who have sex with her. Despite the deep suffering she experiences due to the guilt of her acts, despite her pangs of remorse, she can't stop herself. Her sin has already taken on a life of its own, gone out of control and is damaging others as well.

I burden myself with these sins.

I even burden myself with the harmful ill will that is attached to these sins.

As a consequence, I also get attacked.

But only by doing so can I control my target.

—A 'box' can grant any 'wish'. But there is no one with a perfectly undistorted wish. A 'box' grants such distorted 'wishes' in their exact distorted form.

I'm no exception to this rule. Because of my burdensome sense of realism, I can't bring myself to fully believe in the power of the 'boxes'. I can't help but feel that, on some level, it's just a pipe dream.

If you use a 'box' thoughtlessly, your 'wish' will be twisted and not come true.

Fortunately though, I was aware of this rule. Thus, I decided against using my 'box' immediately after receiving it from 'O', and instead sought a way to master it.

Before long, I was given the chance to gain mastery over my 'box' within Koudai Kamiuchi's "Game of Idleness." I was able to become enlightened.

You mustn't try to grant your 'wish' directly with the 'box'. You have to 'wish' for the *means* to grant your 'wish'.

Imagine that you wanted to destroy the world. When you wish directly for that goal, the 'wish' automatically becomes vague and doubtful at the same time, preventing you from mastering the 'box'. Instead, you should take an indirect route and 'wish' for a switch that can trigger a nuclear holocaust. Such a 'wish' has enough force to destroy the world and is concrete enough to be easily visualized.

Of course that may still be an absurd 'wish'. You have to be able to believe that a 'box' has enough power to grant it. That said, I have already seen the unbelievable power of the 'boxes'. It's no problem for me to imagine something as basic as control over existing nuclear arsenals.

Even a realist like me can master the 'boxes' in this manner.

My true 'wish' is to "wipe out all those thoughtless fools." I refrained from trying to grant this 'wish' directly and instead asked for a weapon to do so.

Controlling others.

That's the weapon I've chosen.

It's probably my basic nature that lets me grant my 'wish'. Anyone else would probably have failed, unable to believe that they can control others. But I've always considered it possible to control others with my words and actions to a certain extent. While that might or might not be true, it doesn't matter, because my belief in the *possibility* of control let me grant my 'wish' without distortion. By imposing some strict conditions on myself, I solidified my 'wish' even more. After doing so, I was finally able to obtain my power.

But this power is terribly weak compared to my ultimate goal. It's a power that requires me to take a ridiculously roundabout approach. I have never hated my realist's mindset as much as I do now.

That being said, I don't really mind.

After all, this power feels extremely fit and proper.

And doesn't that mean that it suits me perfectly?

"Will you stop your pointless revenge?" I ask the girl who's still crouching and crying.

"Ahaahh," she pants incomprehensibly while nodding vigorously.

There's no doubt that this girl will stop her self-defeating revenge. There seems to be no special need to control her.

Since I'm done here, I walk away. Suddenly two men who look like college students stand in my way.

"...Hey, what have you done to that girl?"

The speaker's tone is calm, but both students are burning with righteous indignation and don't seem to plan on letting me pass. Apparently, they think that I harassed the girl.

"I haven't done anything. Right?" I say and turn to her.

She hurriedly wipes away her tears and stands up.

"Yes. Nothing at all," she says as she raises her head.

Even though she hasn't done anything unusual, the students shrink back.

—Why?

After looking at her, I understand their response - no wonder they shrunk back when they caught a glimpse of her face.

Her smile is utterly unnatural - it looks as if the corners of her mouth are being pulled up by strings. A dull light is glittering in her eyes.

—Oh no, not *that* pattern...

"This man is a god."

Please don't.

All I did was stir up her feelings of guilt. I prepared to control her, but in the end I didn't. But it looks like she was able to reconcile her feelings because I sucked up her remorse and confronted her with it. I accidentally provided something akin to a perfect counseling session with instant success.

Because I accomplished this in a single moment with a mysterious power, she thinks I'm a god. It's a pattern that occurs from time to time when I use my 'box'.

With this newest development, the college students seem to have hit their limit and walk away with contorted faces.

I, too, contort my face and look at the schoolgirl. She is breathing wildly and smiling as if gazing at a celestial being.

For heaven's sake, don't call me a god. Stop that. Seriously. It's disgusting. It feels like someone stuck a finger down my throat. I'm not god-like, nor do I want to become a god.

But.

"——Right. I'm a god."

I have to let them call me that.

I'm still a wimp. I haven't completely thrown away my "self" from back when I still believed in the benevolence of human nature, back before I started getting my piercings. That's why I suffer so much from burdening myself with other people's sins.

If it's normal for a human to suffer from doing that, then I must stop being human. I must become heartless. If choking Koudai Kamiuchi to death wasn't enough to overcome my weakness, then I just have to kill again. That's how important it is to erase my weakness.

I will transcend myself.

If I have to become akin to a god to accomplish my goal, I shall become a god.

"....."

I look at the girl who's worshipping me.

There's no special need to control her... but then there's no reason *not* to take control of her either. How can I become a god if I'm not prepared to steal her dignity and wreck her?

It's child's play to ruin her life.

Her life's as good as over anyway. Then—

"Abandon everything for me."

I touch the "Shadow of her Sin" that's within my chest and start controlling her.

"...Ah..."

She lets out a sensual moan and leans against me. As if begging to be dominated, she looks up at me with moist eyes.

"Rejoice. I can give even a filthy whore like you a purpose. Well, let's see. First of all, lick my shoes right now."

"Oooh, thank you so much! Thank you so much!!!"

Without hesitation, the girl starts to lick the soles of my boots.

"I'm happy. I'm so happy. What bliss it is to touch something you put on, even if it's just with my tongue!"

While bathing in the curiosity and scorn of the surrounding people, I think:

How stupid. Making her do something like that only makes me feel embarrassed at best. It makes me sick. But I have to subdue everyone like that.

I have to let go of my insignificant personal feelings.

"——Ngh!"

But I am still grieving.

I—touch one of my piercings.

By now, I have a total of six piercings in my ears. I felt the strong urge to create holes in my body, which is why I got those piercings.

"———"

For some reason, Kokone Kirino's face crosses my mind.

Even though I'm supposed to throw away my feelings for her, her face crosses my mind.

The Kokone Kirino in my thoughts, however, is not that superficial, Barbie doll of a woman who puts in contacts, constantly changes her haircut, and needs more than an hour every morning for her makeup.

The Kokone Kirino I see is that timid and sensitive girl who always used to follow me wherever I went. Back then, the self-conscious eyes behind her glasses looked only at me.

I shake off my mental image of Kiri's face.

Yeah, I know! My attachment to Kiri is the greatest obstacle to achieving my goal.

I gaze down at the girl who is still licking my shoes.

I will change the world.

I will revolutionize the world!

"...Right."

In order to make that possible, I must abandon Kokone Kirino.

I will also have to defeat my greatest enemy.

"I will go meet the zeroth Maria."

A certain simpleton who was transformed by the killer game and has resolved to pursue his goal with absolute determination.

That specialist in crushing 'wishes' will appear before me without fail. This time, he won't be drawn in by a 'box'; instead he'll take action of his own accord and attempt to crush my 'box'.

—Kazuki Hoshino.

I will fight against you.

Kokone didn't change even after Daiya disappeared.

It doesn't matter if she expected Daiya to disappear; her lack of reaction was still extremely unnatural. This led me to the following conclusion:

Kokone's cheery personality is just a facade.

Not just right now, but for the entire time that I've known her.

Truth be told, I've long been aware that her cheerful attitude is somewhat forced and fake. I also realized that even though Haruaki and Daiya knew her true self, they played along with her forced cheeriness anyway.

And I noticed that Daiya always seemed unhappy about the situation.

At the same time, I never thought Kokone's choice was that significant.

After all, everyone wears a mask to a certain degree when dealing with other people. Mogi-san, for example, told me that she had struggled quite a bit in the past to maintain her social contacts. "If Kokone is deliberately trying to become that kind of person, then there's nothing wrong with her choice."

That's what I thought.

But I must have been mistaken.

Otherwise the following incident would never have occurred.

"No, but seriously Kazu-kun, that was awful of you! I mean sure, it may be wrong to get Kasumi's hopes up by being too gentle, but come on, you understand the position she's in, don't you?"

It was after school when that incident occurred.

"You should know well enough *why* Kasumi wants to come back to school! Kazu-kun, do you even realize how horribly your behavior has affected her, especially after all the hardships she's borne while trying to recover?!"

Kokone was scolding me because I had left Mogi-san the day before to go to Maria's apartment instead.

"I want you to know: you're *seriously* mistaken if you think that she's okay just because she seemed cheerful after her accident! No one would be okay

with their body in such a state! Kasumi is just trying to appear strong because she doesn't want us to worry!"

It was July, just before the summer holidays. Even though it was already past 5 p.m., the sun still shone strongly through the windows, keeping the classroom brightly lit. It was probably quite hot, too, but I can't really remember.

Kokone was desperately trying to hold back her tears. I couldn't help but admire her empathy for her friend, as wrong as it was for me to be thinking about that while being scolded.

But I couldn't just nod and smile.

I understood Kokone's point quite well. Of course I want to be gentle with Mogi-san.

But I have already picked Maria.

Therefore, I made it clear that I would devote myself to Maria.

"Kokone, I have chosen Maria———..."

Kokone replied with another objection, despite being somewhat shocked by my unshakable attitude.

"B-But that's no excuse for acting like that yesterday! Couldn't you at least wait until Kasumi's recovered further?! Treating her gently for a tiny bit longer shouldn't be a problem!"

I remained silent.

Not because I agree with Kokone, but because everything I want to say would only hurt her feelings.

In all honesty, no matter what she tells me, even if she hates me and never speaks to me again, my choice won't change. I consider Kokone a dear friend and I don't want to lose her, but that has nothing to do with my choosing Maria.

I understood what Kokone was trying to get at. But when would the perfect moment be? Does it even exist? Was I supposed to tell Mogi-san only after she'd returned to school? How about right after Mogi-san had completed an exhausting rehabilitation and finally fulfilled her wish of living a normal student's life by my side? Could that possibly be the best time to tell Mogi-san that I had chosen Maria?

Of course not.

Mogi-san would still suffer even if I held off on telling her about my decision.

"Say something, Kazu-kun! Please, don't hurt Kasumi any more than this!"

I don't want to hurt her either.

I wanted to tell Kokone that with all my heart, but as the one who *was* hurting Mogi-san, I had no right to do so.

I took out my cell phone. Kokone complained, "what are you looking at now?!" I just ignored her and found the picture that I was looking for.

It was an image of Mogi-san making a peace sign in her pajamas.

I was really fond of that picture. Mogi-san's sunflower-like smile always cheered me up.

Looking at it, I understood why I could have loved her in a different world and a different time. It was only natural that I would fall in love with a girl that gave me such a warm, loving smile. It was a very, very precious picture of mine.

Therefore—I deleted it.

Because I could not choose Mogi-san anymore.

I remained silent and continued to stare at Kokone. She seemed defeated by my steadfast look, and didn't say anything else.

As we were the only ones in the classroom, it was completely quiet.

—Yes, there was a deep silence.

That's probably why those two girls from our class thought that the classroom was empty. Because of that mistake, they started trash talking Kokone on their way back to the classroom from their club activities.

"Man, Kokone sure is acting slutty lately."

...without having the faintest idea that the target of their malicious gossip was right there.

"Isn't she a real attention whore? Her whining about her glasses yesterday really pissed me off. I mean, come on, we don't give a shit about your face! If you don't want to talk to us, then just talk to yourself in the mirror!"

"Yeah, totally! It's so annoying that she's always talking about herself! Besides, she's not nearly as cute as she makes herself out to be. It's like day and night if you compare her face to Maria-sama's. I bet Maria-sama's at least three times as pretty!"

"Haha, Kou, you're so terrible!"

I recognized those amused voices. They belonged to two girls from our class who had befriended Kokone. All three of them would often have lunch together.

"But you can't deny any of it. Isn't Kokone just relying on her make-up? Oh boy, she's so desperate to get popular with the guys."

"Mh... but she *is* popular... are guys really unable to see through all that BS?"

"Oh, they'll fall for you if you're somewhat cute and act overly friendly. I guess guys are also less shy if the girl is only somewhat cute, no?"

"And that's what makes her perfect!"

"Hey, I wonder if she thinks that everyone likes her? I mean, we just hang around with her because she attracts the guys."

"Yeah, she's really useful that way."

"But god does it stress me out. And she's gotten much less useful ever since our sharp-tongued prince has stopped coming to school."

"Oh, Mii-chan- Oomine-kun was your favorite, wasn't he?"

"He's got a hard shell, but in reality he's really gentle! He's overflowing with dignity and not vulgar in the slightest! I'm the only one who really understands you, my Daiya-kyun!"

"Oh cut that out, Mii-chan! You're only saying that because of his looks, aren't you!"

"You've got a point there. Ugly people deserve to die anyway!"

"But is Oomine-kun dating Kokone?"

"Mhh, if you make it past tense, maybe?"

"Aah, that could be. Maybe she managed to seduce him, but they broke up when he realized what she's really like?"

I wanted to cover my ears to escape from their unbearable slander, but how could I do so with their victim standing right beside me?

Their voices drew nearer, and at any moment, the girls would come face-to-face with Kokone. Unable to make a decision, I wanted to turn back toward Kokone.

She must be white as chalk and petrified. Maybe she's starting to cry... What should I do? Should I help her hide and wait for them to leave? After that I could go with her to Mickey D's, listen carefully to her woes and try to comfort her to the best of my ability...

But there was no need to comfort her.

She wasn't at all upset.

Kokone was—smiling in amusement.

".....Huh?"

At the time, I was baffled. I didn't understand how she would be able to maintain her composure in the face of such vile comments.

Ah, but hindsight is 20/20. Having witnessed her subsequent behavior, I can guess why she was so amused.

What Kokone felt at the time must have been—

"Fufu..."

—a sense of superiority.

The two girls opened the classroom door. Once they saw Kokone, they stiffened in a ridiculously abrupt manner.

"O-Oh, you were here?"

In contrast to their stiff faces, Kokone's countenance remained perfectly normal.

"Yes, I was."

They were confused by how calm she was.

"Um... Kokone...?"

"So that's what you think of me. I'm a little dense, you know, so I didn't notice. Honestly, I'm sorry! I'll try to change for the better, I promise."

"U-Um, yeah, Kokone..."

"I know, I know. When you speak ill of someone, it's easy to go a little overboard, right? But that's only because you get carried away, not because you actually feel that way. Yeah, I know."

She seemed quite forgiving of their cruel comments. While they were still wary, their faces started to relax a bit.

"E-Exactly!" "We just got carried away," they said while making up excuses. Kokone's smile remained unchanged.

"But you know, because I heard what you said, some awkwardness will remain... you do understand that, right?"

"Y-Yeah."

"But I've got a solution: why don't you let me say some things in return? Then we'll be even and we can go back to being friends!"

"Y-Yeah, you're right. Say whatever you want."

After her "friends" agreed to her proposal, Kokone opened her mouth and spoke.

She looked them straight in the eyes and spoke clearly and precisely.

"Drop dead, you ugly bitches."

Their eyes widened in disbelief.

"You're as nasty as a pair of bitches in heat. Your faces are so ugly, there's not a single person in the entire world who you could stand next to make you look better. You said that all I'm good for is attracting guys? Say that again when your own goddamn mugs aren't too ugly to get the job done! Even if you want to use me as a guy magnet, what's the point - not even a blind man would be interested in a bunch of bitches as ugly as you!"

As Kokone's words began to register, one of the two girls turned red with anger, while the other one turned pale with fright.

"Hahaha, I can't help laughing! I mean, you realize that you've acknowledged my superiority with your stupid envy, right? Is it that painful to be so inferior? Please don't overdo it, okay? I'm not *that* perfect. At any rate, let me tell you this: you're worthless bitches whose only purpose in life is to make me look even better."

The angry glint in her eyes that had been piercing them disappeared abruptly, and a cheerful smile reappeared on her face.

"All right, now let's forget everything and be friends again!"

Those girls haven't spoken a single word to Kokone ever since.

While recalling that incident, I'm using my sister Luu-chan's laptop to watch a Youtube video of a weird group of people in Shinjuku.

By now I know:

How Kokone was able to say such cruel things to those two girls, while shedding tears for Mogi-san.

I used to think that Kokone's goal was to actually internalize the superficial, cheery image that she tried so hard to project. But that's not true. In fact, now I'm sure that Kokone was forced to act that way. It was somehow her only choice, even if it meant straining herself to the utmost.

Without stressing herself like that, Kokone could not stay herself.

And I suspect those two girls had accidentally encroached upon a forbidden part of Kokone's personality.

Therefore she snapped.

So far, I haven't discovered *what's' been driving her internal conflict*.

But I bet Daiya knows the truth.

"Ah, I've also seen that video! He's an amazing boy, isn't he? So charismatic for someone his age."

While peeking at the screen, my "roommate" made a comment that totally missed the mark. I turn around.

"...Hey, that's my Umaibō, isn't it?"

While I'm saying that, Luu-chan opens a package of Tonkatsu-sauce^[1]-flavored Umaibō^[2].

"But you're using my computer, right?"

"Yeah. But that's irrelevant."

She reluctantly took out her wallet and pressed a 10-yen coin into my hand.

...That's not what I meant... whatever.

While munching on the Umaibō, she adds indifferently:

"I wonder if it's people like that who revolutionize the world?"

I return my gaze to the laptop screen.

Yeah... perhaps.

Daiya might be trying to destroy the world with his 'box'.

And if he's using a 'box', he will definitely get Maria involved.

Once that happens, Maria's regular life will be lost and she will once more be overtaken by "Aya Otonashi."

".....I—"

—won't let that happen. No matter what.

During the "Game of Idleness," I realized that my enemy is the "Aya Otonashi" who has possessed "Maria Otonashi" and is leading Maria to her death. For Maria's sake, I must free the world from 'O' and 'boxes'.

I have to stop Daiya.

But how?

I'm no 'owner'. Depending on what Daiya's 'box' is capable of, I may not have anything to use against him.

So how am I supposed to protect Maria?

"———"

There is one extremely simple solution.

It's a method that I want to avoid with all my heart, a method that would require me to betray my former self. Ah, but why do I still care? I have prepared myself to get my hands dirty. In fact, I already *have* besmirched them by abandoning Koudai Kamiuchi.

Therefore—

Even if I have to obtain and use a 'box', I don't care anymore.

Let the clash of 'box' versus 'box' begin.

A clash of my 'wish' to crush the 'boxes' versus Daiya's 'wish'.

I don't know what Daiya's 'wish' is. But it's definitely something he will fight for with no holds barred.

But whatever it is—

"I can't stand it."

All 'wishes' that have to depend on a 'box' are utter shit. No matter how important that 'wish' is to Daiya, it's shit. I'll beat it to a pulp and wipe it out, leaving not a single stain.

Even if I have to kill Daiya.

"...Kazu-chan, you have been a little scary lately. Your eyes just took on a bit of a murderous look, you know?"

I ignore Luu-chan's ramblings, and shut down the computer.

I have come to a resolution.

I will fight against Daiya.



Scene 1
『Close-Up Goodbye』
08:30~18:00

scene 1: close-up goodbye

- **1. HOTEL EXTERIOR - NIGHT**

- The hotel is fairly large and looks like a business hotel. Night has fallen, but it's not quite pitch-black yet.

- **2. HOTEL ROOM**

- A basic room without much in the way of furniture. It is decently sized. KOUDAI KAMIUCHI, a second-year middle school student, has brought MIYUKI KARINO here. She is surrounded by a group of men with blatantly obscene smiles. Her face has blanched with fear. Behind the men is a double bed.

- MIYUKI

- K-Kou-chan!

- Ignoring MIYUKI, KOUDAI closes the door. Without missing a beat, MIYUKI tries to escape. One of the men blocks her way. Searching for a place to hide, she instinctively rushes into the bathroom.
- Fortunately, there's a lock on the bathroom door. MIYUKI locks the door. She sits down in front of it. Her breathing is rough. The men's silhouettes can be seen through the partially transparent door.

- MAN 1

- Come here, my sweet Miyuki-chan!

- MAN 2

- Don't be frightened! C'mon, let's have some fun together!

- MAN 3

- Do you even know how much we paid for you!?

- While the men pound on the door, MIYUKI's lips tremble. She embraces herself tightly. She makes several false starts as she frantically tries to open her school bag. MIYUKI finally pulls open the zipper and takes out a cellphone with many cellphone straps attached.
- She starts to type with trembling fingers.

- **3. CELL PHONE DISPLAY**

- "Help! Weird men are trying to". A pale MIYUKI is writing on her phone. Suddenly she stops. The camera pans down to the end of the message, which simply says: "Help me."

- **4. AT RINO'S (FLASHBACK)**

- Cut to a blushing, smiling, elementary school-aged MIYUKI who is having her hair ruffled by DAIYA OOMINE.
- Next to her is KOKONE KIRINO. She is standing close to DAIYA and has an uneasy expression on her face.

- **5. BATHROOM**

- On the verge of tears, MIYUKI continues to type. The camera zooms in on the cell phone display: "Help me Dai-kun!" She presses a button. "Your e-mail has been sent."
-

If a movie were made of my life, those cinematographers would discover that it's no use waiting for the new screenplay to write itself; the story of my struggle to transcend my own limitations may be original, but it would not be well received. Topics like 'boxes' and 'O' are way too implausible for the average moviegoer.

If anything, I think that the scenes involving my past love life would attract a lot of viewers. Ah, but in that case, they'd have to tack on a happy ending. Let's say I die from a terminal illness; Kiri has to come to terms with my death, and moves on. How does that ending sound? A few decades ago, it would have been a hit.

Unfortunately, in reality I didn't die. Life went on even after tragedies struck and left behind permanent scars.

The story of Daiya Oomine has long since ended.

The curtain has fallen.

Therefore, I should bring everything that remains of my human life to an end.

In order to do so, I returned to school.

"Oh Kazu-kun... why don't you just admit that you were fascinated by my beauty?"

"Time to open her eyes, Hoshii! 'No. I only stared at you because I mistook you for a giant dung fly.'"

Kiri and Haruaki are joking back and forth although classes are about to start.

I try to join in while sitting at my desk:

"I've always used the word 'bloodlust' without much thought, Kiri, but thanks to you I finally understood its true meaning. I'll no longer misuse it in the future. Thanks."

"Eh? Aah, did my brilliance make you unable to stand your own wretchedness and cause you to feel bloodlust toward yourself? Well done!"

What a superficial, fake conversation. It's the same as copying some popular song by looking at the score.

It's painful to watch them carry on in this blatantly false fashion.

I disappeared for a long time. On top of that, I obtained a 'box' and changed. Plus, some people in our class may have seen that Shinjuku video and noticed my starring role. And, I came back all of a sudden at the end of the summer holidays. There's no way I could smoothly reenter daily school life after a single day.

The lukewarm atmosphere Kiri used to strive for doesn't exist anymore. As further proof of this, some of the girls are avoiding her.

Most likely, the everyday school life would have broken down whether I came back or not. Maria Otonashi's arrival and the various 'boxes' Kazuki Hoshino has gotten involved with have opened up various hairline fractures in it. Nonetheless, Kazu may have been able to maintain the peace if he had chosen to do so - but now that he has overcome the 'Game of Idleness', Kazu won't bother with something so futile anymore.

This false everyday life is ending.

And I will deal it the killing blow.

Yesterday I brought several dozen students under my control. This school marks the starting point for my scheme.

If everything affected by a 'box' is "distorted," I will cover the entire world in "distortion."

I use my cell phone to write a message to a certain murderer. One of the students under my control had gotten me her contact info.

"This is Daiya Oomine. I want to talk, so meet me on the rooftop during lunch break. I'll make sure the door is open."

Student council president Iroha Shindou accepts my request, and appears on the school rooftop during the lunch break.

"Long time no see, Oomine-kun. Hmmh? Ah, even that isn't true. I guess this is the first time we *really* get to talk?" she says. "Can't you choose a better place to confess? I'm sweating like crazy."

I was expecting her to still be recovering from the 'Game of Idleness', but... this girl has the guts to casually converse with someone she opposed in a fight to the death. That's Iroha Shindou for you.

That only reinforces my decision to call her out.

"You do remember killing me, right?"

My blunt question causes her eyes to widen for a split second, but she quickly laughs it off with a "you look pretty alive if you ask me!"

"Looks like you do."

Shindou purses her lips and scratches her head. She may seem cool, but she really isn't. The look on her face shows that it's only an act.

"Well, let me jog your poor memory. You should be smart enough to know that that incident was neither a dream nor an illusion. But I believe that there are certain gaps in your memory. Do you remember the identity of the culprit?"

Shindou hesitates slightly, and answers contemptuously.

"...it was Kamiuchi, right?"

"Right. And since you remember that, I'm sure you have also wondered how Koudai Kamiuchi was able to do something like that," I say. Then, I mention a certain word. "He had a 'box'."

Shindou is waiting for me to continue. However, I keep my mouth shut, convinced that I've already said enough.

Seeing me maintain my silence, she scratches her head.

"Umm... Haven't you cut your explanation a bit too short?"

"Didn't I say enough for you to understand at least some of what was going on?"

"Looks like you're overestimating me. I'm not good at drawing conclusions or anything, you know? ...But a 'box', huh. From your wording, I assume that it's the tool that brought about that killer game? Or should I think of it as a tool that, among other things, has the power to create such a game?"

As I expected, Shindou was able to draw plenty of information from just a few comments.

Not only that, she even moves on to conclude:

"So? Could it be that you've also got one of those 'boxes', Oomine-kun?"

Heh, who are you saying is *not good at drawing conclusions*?

"Yes. While it's not specialized for creating killer games, I do possess a 'box' right now. Well, I suppose it wasn't hard for you to guess as much, since I raised the subject after calling you out here."

"Uh, well, I just realized that the air about you has changed, and that makes it clear that something must have happened."

The air about me has changed?

Hardly a surprise, I guess, after everything I've done since becoming an 'owner'.

"And what exactly is a 'box', now?"

"It's an item that can grant any wish."

"Any wish? Not bad. But most of the time, you can't take something like that literally, can you? It's bound to be some sort of cursed object. Like a piece of equipment you can't take off from some famous RPG. Ah, let me clarify: I have enough common sense to reject that 'box' story. But because we'd get nowhere like that, I'm proceeding on the assumption that it exists," she says. With a disparaging attitude, Shindou adds, "That aside, what was your wish, Oomine-kun? Requited love? Now aren't you cute!"

"A worldwide revolution."

Shindou abruptly falls silent.

"...are you serious?"

"Yeah."

Unsure of how to react, Shindou replies without any expression at all:

"Hah... whatever. I'll take your word for it. So that means that you're trying to stand at the vanguard to change the world using that power? Listen, Oomine-kun - I don't think you're up to that task, and I don't think you're well-suited for it to begin with."

She sure doesn't mince words.

Still, her evaluation is perfectly natural since she really only knows me from the 'Game of Idleness'.

As an NPC, all I did was reject contact with others. I didn't support anyone else. A person who wants to "stand at the vanguard" should have protected the other players like Shindou did.

If asked which one of us would make the better leader at that particular point in time, everyone would have voted for Shindou.

But exactly because of that, I *must* surpass her.

That's why I called her out—

—to the sunny rooftop, where I cast a thick shadow.

"Let me tell you how I am going to change the world."

"Yeah?" Shindou replies half-heartedly. "You know, I'm really not interested to be honest. I'll lend you an ear if you insist, but can't we at least go to the canteen? I'm burning up out here."

"No."

"Aha. Goodbye then. You already know my e-mail address, so drop me a line. Make sure you make the subject 'my *brilliant* plan to change the world.' Pft. You've definitely watched too much anime, Oomine-kun. If you sent me such an e-mail, I wouldn't even open it, let alone read it."

She turns away from me, but I get right back in front of her.

"Hey. I know I'm so charming that you don't want to let me go, but girls don't like pushy guys, you know? If I were Yuuri, I'd cry in front of my admirers and tempt them into giving you a beating."

Shindou dodges around me.

But that doesn't matter anymore. I have already achieved my goal.

I have already made her tread upon my shadow.

Thus—

The sin of murder flows into me.

Now that's a fierce one...

I'm having a hard time standing upright.

When I was dealing with that middle school girl, there was a strong feeling of hatred, but this new sin is just razor-sharp. That's one hell of a stimulant. Just one moment of carelessness and that piercing sin will easily tear my innards to shreds.

But I absorb even such a sin.

"Shindou," I say toward her back, "Drown in your own sins."

I grab the shadow of sin that I have just received and—

"———!!"

—swallow it.

"Uh...Ah,...AH!"

Moments before reaching the door handle, Shindou suddenly groans. Her face distorts in pain and she sinks down to the ground, as if her heart were

being crushed. She's drenched in cold sweat. Shindou is feeling the same cutting pain I am feeling.

Suffer. This is your sin.

I look down at her while she scowls up at me from her crouched position.

"What... have you... done?!"

"Despite your composed appearance, it seems you haven't gotten over it after all. You just became good at hiding it, huh."

"I'm asking what you've done!"

"I merely made you recall your guilt."

"...Hah?"

"Oh well. Let me give you an explanation about my 'box', the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment'. It's a 'box' that enables me to subjugate humans and control them at will. Once I swallow people's 'Shadows of Sin,' they recall the moment of their life when their pangs of remorse were at their very worst. To be exact, they recall the feelings they had at that moment. In your case, it's the murders you committed during the 'Game of Idleness'."

"...T-These feelings are from... back then...? No... wonder they seemed kind of familiar," she says while getting teary-eyed.

"You have been [subjugated]. I can now control you at will."

Holding her chest, she stands up and assumes a hostile attitude.

"Do you think [subjugating] me like this will prove your oh-so-high caliber or what?"

"There'd be no point to that, would there?"

Shindou wrinkles her brow.

"...T-Then what do you have in mind?"

"The power of the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' is triggered through shadows. See my silhouette on the ground? That's it. This shadow, which has gotten darker than black because of the countless sins that have mingled inside it, is my 'box'. But this 'box' doesn't belong to me alone. It is shared among all people whose sins have been absorbed."

"...Does that mean..."

"It means that you can use it, too."

Shindou widens her eyes.

"Hold on. In that case, have you called me out here because you want to...?"

Quick on the uptake as ever.

Guessing what I was going to say, she continues:

"You want to make me your ally?"

I answer by daringly lifting a corner of my mouth.

I want to increase my chances of winning against Kazuki and his companions. For that purpose, I need the unbending will of Iroha Shindou.

"That being said, if you disagree with my intentions, you're not going to cooperate. Therefore, I'll explain what I plan to do."

"...Yeah, yeah, I got it. Just do something about this pain!"

"Impossible. That pain has been yours from the start. I merely woke it up. Do something about it yourself. Otherwise, you're not worthy of my power, and I'll just take advantage of you as a servant."

"You half-assed visual kei wannabe...! Tch, yeah-yeah, I got it! Don't underestimate me, okay? As long as I know where these feelings come from, it's a fucking piece of cake to get them under control! Wait a sec until I can clear my head again. I'll tear that plan of yours apart with my words alone!" she hisses... and then takes a deep breath, as if she's just completed a strenuous set of exercises.

After a few more breaths, she gradually grows calm.

"Okay, please go on," Shindou urges me, having completely regained her composure.

Not bad at all. I sure didn't expect her to *really* clear her head within a few seconds.

"Alright. I plan to strengthen mankind's moral compass. To do that, I will create a new perspective that looks down upon the world."

"Aah, yeah... you've completely lost me, but go on."

"Okay, let's say you're about to vandalize a statue of Christ. Even if you know that it's a lifeless block of stone, you'll have a hard time convincing yourself to do it. Say you're an atheist -- you're still socially conditioned to be in awe of God, and it's natural to fear that you might somehow end up cursed."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Be it Buddha, God, society or whatever: it gets harder to commit a misdeed if there's a belief in some universal entity that observes and stands in

judgment of your actions. Using the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment', I will create a new universal observer."

"How?"

"Have you heard of the 'Dog Humans?'"

"Of course. Ah... you're behind that phenomenon? But why would you take such a roundabout approach even though you have a 'box' that can do anything? Why didn't you just wish for everyone to behave ethically in the first place?"

"I'm a realist, so my wish was limited."

"Hmpf? Poor boy. Oh, well, but if other people can also use that power to control someone, there *will* be some who abuse it, right?"

"Perhaps, but that's not actually an issue."

"You think so?"

"I'm not going to randomly make [masters]. Unless someone who already is a [master] permits it, it's impossible to acquire the power to control others. At this point, I am the only [master]. In fact, you're also the first to know that the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' is a 'box' that can be shared."

"Oh, what an honor," she says sarcastically. "But that means that I would be able to make new [masters] if you made me a [master], right? Wouldn't you lose track if the number of users increased exponentially?"

"[Masters] won't pass their power on carelessly. You'll understand why once you've actually acquired this power."

"I'll find out why, huh... well, even if that's true, you still haven't convinced me that that power won't be abused."

"You're connected to the others through feelings of guilt. If you are aware of the fact that you're abusing the 'box', it will lead to feelings of guilt. And these feelings will be conveyed to the others—especially to the [masters]."

"Huuh. So everyone's kinda under constant mutual surveillance."

She purses her lips again. Ah, if I remember correctly, she has a habit of doing that.

"Well, I guess I understand. But Oomine-kun, why did you use your 'box' for something like *that*? If you ask me, you'd be much happier if you were honest about your wishes."

"....."

I wish I didn't have to tell her, but I need her cooperation.

I open my mouth while fiddling with one of my piercings.

"I hate thoughtless people."

"Well, I don't like them either, and I think anyone with some brains would concur."

"Until a certain point in my life, I believed that lives were ruined by conscious malice. I thought that villains were responsible for the destruction of good people. But I was mistaken. It's the thoughtless idiots who steal others' happiness and ruin their lives. Not the evil people—it's the fools, the scumbags who are incapable of considering how much their selfish behavior will hurt others.

Let's take a habitual shoplifter for example. Because of the losses caused by his shoplifting, a targeted shop might close down. One of the employees might be unable to find a new job, and his or her family might fall apart due to the lack of income. If the shoplifter has considered all of these factors and still continues to maliciously steal, then he's an evil person. But most shoplifters aren't like that. They have a vague idea that shoplifting is a bad thing, but they still steal in order to satisfy their desires—without even considering the collateral damage caused by their actions—and ruin the lives of others without a second thought."

"Oomine-kun," Shindou says with an unusually earnest face. "Your happiness was stolen by someone like that, right?"

I have no intention of answering that question.

"Once the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' has my desired impact on the world, people will be more aware of their sins. That's also the reason I'm causing such a fuss about the 'Dog Humans.' When everyone reflects on the meaning of guilt, ethics will improve. The masses will start to consider the consequences of their actions. They will stop committing crimes. And finally, the number of tragedies will decrease."

"Do you think it will go that smoothly?"

"The die is cast. There's no way back anymore."

Shindou gazes at me with calculating eyes.

"But say... is that really your...," she stops. "...No, forget what I said. Umm, I think that the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' is a clever system, and what you're doing is quite interesting, but as I mentioned before, I don't think you're up to the task."

"How about judging me then?"

"Mh?"

"I am going to give you the power of a [master] now. In order to [control] a [servant], you have to burden yourself with the entirety of his sin. I'll turn over... yes, 10 people's sins to you, including some of your classmates'."

"So you'll enable me to [control] those ten people? I don't quite get how I'm supposed to judge you with that power?"

"You'll understand soon."

"...Hmpf. Are you sure? I haven't agreed with you yet, so I might not cooperate even after getting that power?"

"If you still think that I'm unworthy of your cooperation after judging me, then I don't mind. But should you acknowledge me, you will cooperate with me—no ifs, ands, or buts."

Shindou nods and gives me a provoking smile - as if she were dealing with a pampered child.

"Okay, deal! I've made up my mind. If I acknowledge you, I'll go along with your plan!"

"Don't forget that promise!"

"Ah, but don't read too much into that, okay? There's already someone who's taken my fancy."

I can't avoid laughing while she continues to make silly jokes.

Last time she took on the 'boxes', she was driven to murder – yet she's still so laid-back right now.

I suppose she's sure that she won't have to acknowledge me. She must be thinking that she can't possibly lose to my 'box'.

"...Heh."

Don't get cocky, Shindou!

I'll make you regret your arrogant acceptance of our deal. I'll defeat you and show you which one of us is more capable! I will literally bring you under my control and make you lick my feet.

A faint smile forms on my face as I close my eyes.

At the same time, I also close myself.

I search through the countless thoughts that slumber deep within me.

Becoming a [master] also means taming these monsters, the "Shadows of Sin" of [servants], which never tire of rampaging and trying to rip up their host's body.

Shindou, are you capable of that?

"Shindou."

"What?"

"Don't lose trust in people."

I grab her head and push my index finger and middle finger into her mouth—along with a "Shadow of Sin."

Swallowing a sin is like swallowing the dirtiest parts of a person's soul and embracing them.

The first time I absorbed someone's sin, I thought that my blood had turned green and was emitting a foul stench. I even got the feeling that the dirty blood flowing through my veins was making my cells rot. In broad daylight, I hallucinated that I was melting like a zombie. My fingertips reeked of excrement and I feared that I would attract dung flies. That's how much I suffered.

But Shindou might succeed in swallowing such a sin without any trouble.

Perhaps only weak people feel that pain, and Shindou is so strong that she might be unaffected.

If that's the case, I've lost. I'll have to give up on getting her on my side.

Nonetheless, my plan will still proceed, but this defeat will have harsh consequences. I'll lose her strength and even worse, I'll start doubting whether I'm really fit to be a master.

Therefore—

"Uh, Ah, AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!"

Hearing that ear-shattering scream reassures me.

"Ah, ugh, AAAH! N-O! Stop this, what the hell! So dirty-dirty-ouch-owww-OUCH-AAARGH-disgusting-fuck-this is just SICK-just die-DIE, that guy doesn't deserve to live!"

The truth that she's just learned is even worse than that hatred.

"But! But! ...A human. It's just... an ordinary... human..."

That ugliness comes from an average person who lives around the corner. That person isn't a criminal, isn't a wicked fellow – he's just an ordinary person Shindou might even know and be on good terms with.

People commit sins just by living.

Most of us have gotten accustomed to these sins without realizing it. Through our egotistical, individualist values, we forgive ourselves. Even though our sins are disgusting from an external perspective, we readily accept them without any qualms because we have grown accustomed to our own hideousness. To put it plainly: each and every human is terribly easy on himself.

We humans are hideous.

Therefore, we harm others just by living.

While squinting at the despairing Shindou, I mutter:

"Nine more to go."

I grab her head again and prepare myself to make her swallow another shadow, but she suddenly grabs me by my hair with a completely flushed face.

"Don't fuck with me! You... what are you trying to do to me?"

"Do you want me to stop?"

Shindou scowls at me with teary eyes.

"Of course I do! NINE!? Even one more would be too much!"

"But I've got 967 of them," I say out of the blue, astonishing her. "I'm telling you that I have already burdened myself with 967 sins."

Shindou is bereft of speech.

"Y-," she's cut off by a coughing fit. Still hostile, she continues, "You've got 967 of these things?"

Shindou laughs and shakes her head.

"Haha, impossible! Your mind wouldn't be able to take that! Not without being prepared to ruin yourself!"

"Yeah. You got that right."

"Huh?"

"I know that my ruin is inevitable. I could go insane, bite off my tongue and die any moment. I'm prepared for all that."

My life will end miserably. No one will praise or respect me; I will only receive scorn. People will just avert their eyes from my hideous remains, hold their nose due to the foul stench and maybe kick my dead body into a ditch. That's about it.

But I am prepared for that.

No matter what it takes, I will wipe out all those fools.

Shindou slowly loosens her grip.

"I don't mind dying if I manage to set up the stage to a certain extent. In that case, my allies will take over. That's why I designed my 'box' to be shared. I can bequeath the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' even if I die. As long as I don't abandon my 'box', the system will remain intact. Once this system gets rolling, I don't mind if I die."

"What are you..."

"So?" I scoff. "Am I of a higher caliber than you are?"

While looking deeply into my eyes, she lets go of my hair.

She then wipes away her tears with a swift movement of her arm, takes a deep breath and calms down.

Her eyes are once again sharp, and she raises the corner of her mouth.

".....I'll take nine more. I promised to do so, after all."

"You're okay with that?"

"Of course not! But I keep my promises and I believe I'm capable of anything."

She flashes a daunting grin.

"You have my respect, Daiya Oomine! I'll go with that plan of yours until your very last breath!"

◆◆◆ Daiya Oomine - 09/11 FRI 16:13 ◆◆◆

Okay.

This is a sudden turn of events, so let's put the facts in order.

What situation am I in right now?

I am trapped inside a cinema.

I was thrown into a crimson cinema. It's so sterile and lifeless that the air itself feels strange, and I can't help but feel uneasy and intimidated.

"....."

Let's look back at what led to my current predicament.

Together with Shindou, I started taking control of our school.

Shindou once asked me if there really was a point in doing so. Indeed, we gained no strategic advantage from bringing the school under our control and making it our base. However, it was an absolute necessity from a psychological perspective: because I was unable to completely part with my weaknesses, I needed a ceremony to abandon my "everyday school life" for good.

Defeating Otonashi who can sense 'boxes', defeating Kazuki Hoshino who is the arch-enemy of the 'boxes', and parting with Kokone Kirino, the symbol of my everyday life—those were the rituals that I needed to complete. I had even decided on an order in which I was going to perform those rituals. The 999th person I'd control would be Maria Otonashi, the 1000th would be Kazuki Hoshino and the 1001st - Kokone Kirino.

After that, I would start the mass production of "Dog Humans."

And then I would reshape the world using my 'box'.

We made good progress in taking over the school, but everything went so smoothly that I found it eerie.

It was strange that Kazu and Otonashi, who both knew that I was an 'owner', didn't act. Naturally, I expected them to hinder my actions the moment I returned to school.

But they didn't do so.

I did spot them at school together, but they merely gazed at me from afar. Kazu was ignoring me and Otonashi, while seeming to care about me, didn't do anything. Perhaps Kazu was holding her back.

It was not until I made my 998th [servant], Yuuri Yanagi, that he appeared before me.

"You took your time, didn't you?"

We were in the library after school.

I had just made Yuuri Yanagi a [servant] right in the open. After all, Shindou had blocked off the library and the other students there were already under my control.

Yanagi was full of anguish from committing the sin of murder. Kazu gave her a brief, pitying glance, and then scowled at me.

To my surprise, he had hidden there alone.

But now that I think about it, it made perfect sense.

Kazu didn't rely on Otonashi anymore. He wouldn't even let her get near a 'box'. He must have somehow convinced her to remain passive.

"Daiya," he called out to me, and smiled. "I hope you're prepared?"

I couldn't hide my surprise at his smile.

That smile was so similar to the charming smile of 'O'.

I was thrown off balance and immediately started to wonder about the significance of that similarity. Meanwhile, Kazu approached me.

Kazuki Hoshino whispered into my ear with a sweet, soft voice as though he were seducing a girl:

"I'll crush you."

The moment I heard his words, I suddenly found myself in a movie theater.

It was an inconceivable phenomenon.

I realized right away:

This was a 'box'.

Whose?

"...Don't tell me that..."

It was easy to arrive at an answer after considering the situation. Moreover, I had already thought about this scenario.

Still, I found myself unable to immediately accept it.

After all, Kazu used to loathe the 'boxes'. More than anything, he abhorred 'O', who fascinates just about everyone else.

Would he really resort to a 'box' in order to oppose me?

"No..."

I was wrong.

He wasn't trying to oppose me.

He was protecting Maria Otonashi by attacking my 'box'.

For that purpose, Kazuki Hoshino used a 'box'.

And he threw me inside that cinema-like 'box'.

The cinema I found myself in had several screens. I guess that made it a multiplex. It resembled the multiplex at a nearby shopping mall, probably because Kazuki was the 'owner'.

Even while thinking that it was futile, I searched for an exit. But there was no exit to be found. The corridor was lined with a perfectly dust-free red carpet and curved forever. If I had a floor plan, I'd probably discover that the corridor formed a perfect circle. There would be four entrances that led to different screens. Each theater looked identical in size, screen dimensions, number of seats, and every other way.

This was a soulless place.

The conclusion I drew:

I am trapped inside this cinema-like 'box'.

Having sorted out my thoughts, I come up with some new questions:

What does this 'box' do? What's going to happen next?

I look at the digital info panel before me. The screen displays what movies are shown at what time and on which screen.

SCREEN 1: "Close-Up Goodbye" (16:30 - 18:00)

SCREEN 2: "60 Feet and 6 Inches Apart" (18:30 - 20:00)

SCREEN 3: "Repeat, Reset, Reset" (20:30 - 22:00)

SCREEN 4: "Piercing at Fifteen" (22:30 - 24:00)

Each movie is one and a half hours long, with 30 minutes to spare between each one. That means that the movies start exactly two hours apart. The final movie ends today - September 11th - at midnight.

Does that mean I have to watch all of them?

I look at my watch. It's 16:24. I also take out my cell phone (which has no reception right now) to confirm the time. The digital information panel is showing the same time as well. That being said, I'm inside a 'box': time can be flexible, and doesn't necessarily have to march in sync with the real world.

However, it's safe to assume that the first movie, Close-Up Goodbye, will start at the time that my watch indicates.

""

What should I do?

Kazu probably expects me to watch the movies.

On the other hand, if I don't watch them, I won't know what he's up to. I might be unable to craft a counterstrategy, which would contribute to the success of Kazu's plan.

Should I watch the movies to remain informed? Or should I ignore them in order to resist this 'box'?

My internal debate turns out to be pointless.

I am suddenly sitting in front of a screen.

I was teleported again. The overuse of such supernatural effects makes me sigh.

I immediately confirm the situation that I'm in. I'm not being forced to watch the movie. If I wanted to, I could stand up and leave.

But I don't feel like leaving at all.

The apathy that I'm feeling is unrelated to my willpower. Most likely—no, definitely, it's because of this 'box'.

For starters, I try to resist the power that is pinning me to my seat. It's not that I can't move at all. I can stand up. However, just by standing, I feel horribly listless - almost as if I were running a high fever. Standing for an extended period is impossible - my will would fail immediately.

While resisting the overpowering sense of lethargy, I look around.

.....

What is going on?

There are people all around me.

And not just a few people - I have no idea where they came from, but the theater is as full as it would be on a regular night at the movies.

Haruaki is also present.

Even though he's already dead, I see Koudai Kamiuchi as well.

I don't know everyone in the audience - there are some people I only know by sight and people who I've never seen before.

—Why is Kamiuchi here? Why were these people chosen? If the 'box' is being used to assemble people I know, why are some of the audience members basically strangers?

The faces of the audience members are as stiff as masks. Most likely, they're just lifeless dummies. Kazu's going overboard with all these spooky special effects. At first, I was a little freaked out, but *because* they're so overdone, I quickly recovered and realized that's it's all smoke and mirrors.

I continue to observe them closely, trying to find some common denominator - instead, I discover something new and uncanny.

"What the hell is that?"

It's in the last row in the right corner..... no, I'm not putting it quite right. It's not *there*—It's *not* there.

In that seat, there's a pitch-black hole shaped like a person.

It's absolute darkness.

A hole that's different from a shadow.

If one were to give it a name—it would be an "abyss".

Its eeriness makes me wrinkle my brow, and lose the will to resist the lethargy that holds me in my seat.

".....!!"

I finally noticed her...

The girl sitting next to me.

".....Rino."

Miyuki Karino.

The ex-girlfriend of the person I murdered, Koudai Kamiuchi.

A childhood friend from my neighborhood, my junior by one year.

A childhood friend I will never speak with again.

"——Ugh..."

She's like the other lifeless dolls, expressionless and not reacting to me at all. But I can't convince myself that she's just an object like the others. I can't help but recall my former self because I'm sitting beside her.

Before I can get my feelings under control, a buzzing noise announces the start of the movie.

Partly out of reflex, I look at the screen.

An ordinary hotel appears onscreen.

Is it because the victim of that incident is sitting right beside me that I instantly recognized that building?

The middle school-aged Rino is being approached by obscenely smiling men. Pale faced, she escapes into the bathroom, takes out her cell phone and starts typing an e-mail with her trembling fingers.

A few moments later, she sends the e-mail to me.

The scene changes.

A black-haired boy is shown studying at his desk at home.

The camera focuses on the 'me' from middle school.

I open my vibrating cell phone. The e-mail that Rino just sent appears.

Aah, I'm recalling what happened back then.

I didn't believe her message at first. For one thing, Rino had always been quite mischievous. Most of all, back then I was still naïve and couldn't imagine that a friend of mine would be the victim of such a crime. I didn't believe that I'd ever be in direct contact with any crimes in the real world: crimes only happened on TV and were entirely foreign to me.

"No doubt this must be a prank. But what if she's really in trouble?"

I'm muttering to myself onscreen and finally call Rino. *"Hey, Rino?" "D-Dai-chan, h-help me..."* Rino's voice trembles, and I also hear male voices in the background. *"Hey! Who are you talking to?!"* Crash—the sound of glass shattering. Rino's scream.

The call disconnects.

At that moment, I finally realized what had happened to Rino. I had made her situation even worse by thoughtlessly calling her. While desperately trying to stay calm, I immediately called the police.

At last, I'm permitted to avert my gaze from this utterly repellent movie, and turn to look at the fake "Miyuki Karino" sitting next to me.

It goes without saying that she's expressionless.

But that still sends a message of silent reproach.

I finally realize what the members of the audience have in common.

They are the actors. Haruaki and Kamiuchi—they both have parts to play. Aah, looks like the men who are attacking Rino onscreen are among the audience as well.

Rino and I are the stars, of course.

The Rino next to me is wearing an unfamiliar uniform. It's probably the uniform of the high school she attends today.

...I see. So she managed to enter high school.

When I entered high school and started living alone, I broke off all of my middle school relationships - Haruaki and Kiri were the only exceptions. That's why I didn't even know whether Rino was able to become a high school student after that traumatic incident.

I avert my gaze from her once more.

I want to avert my gaze from everything I see.

But the power of this 'box' is forcing me to watch.

Against my will, my eyes turn back to the screen.

-----.....

Rino is crying and desperately struggling on the hotel bed.

Each and every frame makes me want to scream out in agony.

This isn't a movie - it's just moments from my past.

My past from Rino's perspective.

Her being abandoned in the hotel, Haruaki and my arriving too late to rescue her, everything starting to collapse from that point on—it's just the harsh reality that I have to face.

It's—

It's, I see—

It's the presentation of my sins.

The moment I realize this, my conscience starts to gnaw at me.

My 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' is about to rage.

"Gnh!"

I see, Kazu! So that's your plan!

Your goal is my self-destruction.

By throwing me into a cinema that shows me my past, I'll break under my sins. Just by tolerating the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment', I'm already at my limit. Since my situation is already so precarious, Kazu can crush me without putting himself in danger. All he has to do is give me a little push and I'll fall off the tightrope that I'm walking.

The countless "Shadows of Sin" within me are raging. They are constantly hoping for me to break. They are licking their lips in anticipation of my fall into the abyss. They want to crush my bones with their teeth and devour me once I've fallen into their mouths.

Jeez, even though this is my own power - what a bunch of stupid pets. They don't understand who's their master.

While I'm rubbing my temples in pain, the fake Rino enters my field of vision.

Even though she's supposed to be lifeless, she stares at me without blinking.

Closely.

Closely.

She stares at me so closely.

"...What?"

I ask, even though I know she can't reply.

"....."

Rino stares at me. Without blinking. Without saying a single word.

I know. She's an object. A trick created by the 'box'.

And yet I can't keep myself from talking to her.

"Do you want to tell me that you hate me or what?"

"....."

Rino stares at me. Without blinking. Without saying a single word.

"Of course you do, don't you? Still, I wish from the bottom of my heart that I hadn't tried to rescue you back then! That I hadn't treated you so gently! That you had killed yourself after getting raped by those scum!"

"....."

Rino stares at me. Without blinking. Without saying a single word.

"Yeah, you heard me! Why don't you go kill yourself? How dare you live on so shamelessly? Didn't I teach you that people like you should be too ashamed to go on living?"

"....."
....."

Rino—

No, every single person in this room stares at me. Without blinking. Without saying a single word.

—With reproachful eyes.

"Stop it already."

The words that I just heard happened to be a line spoken by an actor onscreen.

"Stop making excuses by persuading yourself that she deserves to get hurt!"

The person talking to Rino was my old self from back then.

Cut to the next scene.

Rino is scribbling on a picture with a red pen.

"Die, Kokone Kirino! Die! Die!"

Rino has turned the picture of Kokone Kirino bright red, as if Kokone were drenched in blood.

"_____"

I barely manage to avoid giving in.

But unbeknownst to me, the "abyss" in the audience has drawn a little closer.





Scene 2
『60 Feet and 6
Inches Apart』
(18:30~20:00)

scene 2: 60 Feet and 6 Inches Apart

- **1. BASEBALL FIELD - DAY**

- The final match of the local baseball tournament is about to end. It's the ninth inning. Two players are out and there are players on first and third. The count is 1-2: one ball and two strikes. The team's in the lead by 3 to 2.
- A middle school-aged, uniformed HARUAKI USUI is standing at the mound. He wipes his brow and peeks at the catcher's signal.
 - HARUAKI (MONOLOGUE)
 - He's incredible.
- He recognizes the sign and nods.
 - HARUAKI (MONOLOGUE)
 - I stay in this baseball club and ignore our coach's grim stares because of him.
- He takes up a pitching stance.
 - HARUAKI (MONOLOGUE)
 - I have seen a lot of players in the senior league^[1] who are expected to make it to the big leagues. Some of them will definitely make it. But I never considered them to be threats: in my eyes, *he* was the best.
- He takes a deep breath.
 - HARUAKI (MONOLOGUE)
 - Every movement of his play is beautiful. Every moment that I watch him playing, I'm overwhelmed. I can't help but feel uneasy and wonder if I lack the qualities of a true player.
- He lifts his leg.
 - HARUAKI (MONOLOGUE)
 - I became so good at baseball that all the elite baseball schools were trying to recruit me. The fantasy of every young baseball fan - setting foot on the mound at Koushien Stadium^[2] - was no longer a dream, but a goal. Making it to the pros one day seemed within reach.

- He winds up for the pitch.
 - HARUAKI (MONOLOGUE)
 - But ever since I started playing baseball in elementary school, I was merely imitating him.
- He throws a powerful fastball.
- The batter swings and misses.
- Upon seeing his pitch strike the catcher's mitt, HARUAKI shouts out with joy and clenches his fist in triumph.
 - HARUAKI (MONOLOGUE)
 - So I can't imagine ever surpassing him.
- The catcher takes off his mask. A broadly smiling DAIYA appears.
- Without missing a beat, he rushes to the mound and jumps at HARUAKI, hugging him tightly. In a matter of seconds, the rest of the team gathers around them and also starts cheering.
 - HARUAKI
 - Whoa, Daiyan, don't cling to me. I'm totally not stoked about getting a man-hug! And damn are you sweaty!
- Nevertheless, he's smiling as he complains.
 - DAIYA
 - Don't worry: you're way sweatier - and you smell like shit!
- DAIYA is smiling as well.
 - HARUAKI
 - W-WHAT?! Get me some Axe body spray then! I don't want to be rejected by our cute girl manager! I'm planning on giving her the ball that won the game, and telling her that I pitched those strikes just for her! She'll be mine in no time!
 - DAIYA
 - Haha, too bad she doesn't exist, eh?
- The players line up on the field.
 - HARUAKI (MONOLOGUE)
 - One time, I had a scout I knew secretly evaluate his play.
- They bow their heads.
 - HARUAKI (MONOLOGUE)
 - I wanted to stay on his team in high school.

- The players head toward the stands.
 - HARUAKI (MONOLOGUE)
 - But the reaction of that scout was lukewarm. "He's good for his age, but he doesn't have much potential left because he's settled into his half-baked style. I don't know if he can become a regular, and it would definitely be hard for him to get a baseball scholarship." That's how the scout rated him. Indeed, Daiya's physical stats are mediocre. He can't beat me at short-distance runs, in grip strength or in build. Still, I believed that he had enough potential to easily make up for those shortcomings.
 - They bow their heads to the spectators.
 - HARUAKI (MONOLOGUE)
 - The scout could have been wrong. But I knew that objectively speaking, Daiya wasn't that good a baseball player. Aah... maybe I knew all along. Maybe it wasn't his play that overwhelmed me. Maybe I had already surpassed Daiya in terms of baseball potential and abilities. But the hierarchy I've established in my heart will never change, even if I were to become a major league ace.
 - KOKONE is in the stands. She's rejoicing with slightly teary eyes. Her gaze is fixed on DAIYA.
 - DAIYA gives her a wry yet soft smile.
 - HARUAKI (MONOLOGUE)
 - Daiya is still the lead character.
 - As he watches them look deeply into each other's eyes, HARUAKI flashes a bright smile of his own.
 - HARUAKI (MONOLOGUE)
 - That's why I gave up on my first love.
-

◆◆◆ Daiya Oomine - 09/11 FRI 18:00 ◆◆◆

"The screening of 'Close-Up Goodbye' has ended."

The movie ends without any credits. I immediately find myself in front of the digital information panel. Yet another teleport has occurred.

Standing at the empty entrance, I smile awkwardly.

"I'll crush you."

I see.

He's as merciless as his words suggested.

Kazu is sticking his fingers into the scars of my past. He's rubbing salt into those reopened wounds and tearing them open in order to extinguish my 'wish'.

Fuck, he's getting cruel.

"_____"

Wait. Kazu is deliberately attacking me. Why am I accepting everything he shows me at face value?

Are these movies even faithful to reality?

Sure, the way that incident played out in the movie is consistent with my memories. But because it was shown from Rino's perspective, there are details that I can't confirm.

Those parts could be made up. I'll never know if Rino's emotional turmoil was depicted accurately either. Only Rino herself would know.

"It would seem that you've been hit rather hard, would it not?"

I'm taken by surprise by someone's voice and raise my head.

"...Who are you?"

An unfamiliar girl with long hair is standing before me. She's wearing a clean uniform like a department store receptionist's. She has a scarf wrapped around her neck and seems to be roughly my age.

"It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is 'A' and I am the guide to this cinema."

'A' has a dignified aura that doesn't match her age at all. Truth be told, "dignified" gives the wrong impression, because I actually find her highly disagreeable. If she were to kill someone, she would just smile indifferently and not give a damn because she's so far above it all—that's what her haughty dignity conveys to me.

Furthermore, she's terrifyingly beautiful - even more beautiful than Maria Otonashi, who already overawes everyone with her beauty.

"...'A'? That's so stupid. Who are you? Why are you here?"

"I am an artificial personality that belongs to this 'box', the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema'. I do not exist in reality."

In short, she is what Noitan was to the 'Game of Idleness'?

Between this girl and Noitan, I wonder if there's some rule that requires all guides to have shit personalities?

"An artificial personality, huh? So, does that mean that you'll be kind enough to give me an explanation of this 'box'?"

"Certainly."

"Let's just get this over with: what function does this 'box' serve?"

"It has but one purpose: crushing your 'box'. The list of movies - 'Close-Up Goodbye,' '60 Feet and 6 Inches Apart,' 'Repeat, Reset, Reset,' and 'Piercing at Fifteen' - are all intended to make you abandon your 'box', Mr. Oomine."

Even though I expected such an answer, I can't help getting a bit upset when addressed so bluntly. There's no way I would be pleased when I'm told that the torture will continue.

"Furthermore, you may be wondering whether 'Close-Up Goodbye' is an accurate depiction of the past. To answer your question: no, it is not."

"What?"

Why would she tell me that? Even if she's telling the truth, by letting me know that, my emotional stress immediately ratchets down. That's totally inconsistent with the purpose of this 'box'.

"You seem to be doubtful, Mr. Oomine, but let me assure you that this fact will be of no comfort to you. 'Close-Up Goodbye' is a movie made in accordance with Miyuki Karino's memory. My answer is technically correct because the human memory can be distorted and inaccurate at times."

I see. If the movie is faithful to her memories, it means that Rino definitely still holds a grudge against me. Ha, it's so damn unfunny that it's funny.

"...First off, can I even believe what you tell me?"

"I am compelled to only speak the truth."

"Can you prove that that's the truth?"

"It will be very difficult to prove it. I am afraid that I can only ask you to believe me. I beg your pardon."

...Figures. Admittedly, it was a silly question.

But no matter how politely she speaks, no matter how much she apologizes, I don't sense the slightest bit of humility from 'A'. Instead, her polite attitude seems almost mocking. Why did Kazu make the guide such a detestable girl? Does he have the hots for this type of girl? Come to think of it, Otonashi's a similar type... that being said, he's clearly taken it too far.

...Mm, ah, so that's it.

"...I noticed something."

"What might that be?"

"You're 'O', aren't you?"

'A' doesn't answer.

"Noitan, the mascot of Kingdom Royale, was a reflection of Kamiuchi's warped character. But look at Kazu's personality. It's unlikely that he would create a character as disagreeable as you. So why are you in here then? There are two possibilities. One, this isn't Kazuki Hoshino's 'box'. Two, you slipped into this 'box'."

After hearing my explanation, the air around 'A' changes completely. Her smile is all too familiar.

"Truly, I'm impressed."

That smile is unmistakable.

The person standing before me is 'O'.

"I didn't expect you to discover my identity so quickly. I was planning on pretending to be the guide for a little longer."

"...Why are you doing this?"

"This 'box' is way too powerful for you to overcome. I feared that you would have no chance to prevail, so I decided to provide you with some extra information."

"Why do you care if I lose? Aren't you on Kazu's side?"

"I don't care if you lose, but I don't want you to lose instantly. You forget that my goal is to observe Kazuki-kun. Now that I've finally started to understand his true nature, I'm eager to get as much data as possible! Thus, I don't want Kazuki-kun to have an effortless victory, you see?"

"But what if I beat him because you helped me too much?"

"While I would rather avoid that outcome, I don't mind either way."

He seems to be honest. Come to think of it, during the 'Game of Idleness' 'O' said that "*Kazuki-kun doesn't rely on my whims.*" If 'O' really doesn't care if I win, Kazu was right to do so.

That being said, 'O' is definitely biased toward Kazu. 'O' can only say such things because he's sure that I can't win.

"If you want to enjoy yourself, give me some information that's actually helpful! All you told me is that I'll lose if I fail to escape before all the movies are over at midnight."

"Indeed. But I don't think someone who saw through me in an instant would need any more information."

He sure thinks highly of me, huh.

But that statement in itself is a hint. He's essentially saying that I already have enough information to defeat the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema'.

"All right, since you've found me out, I guess I'll take my leave for a while."

"Feel free, I guess? ...Ah, right, there's one thing I want to ask before you go: who is that disagreeable girl that you're imitating? An actress in an upcoming movie or something?"

"No, she's completely unrelated to you. I doubt she will appear in any of the movies. But I have a reason for choosing this appearance, of course."

With these puzzling words, 'O' turns and walks off.

The sound of his footsteps disappears into the distance.

I'm alone again.

I take a look at the clock. It's 18:15. Fifteen minutes to go until the next movie, "60 Feet and 6 Inches Apart," begins. The total remaining time is 5 hours and 45 minutes.

'O' coming to visit hasn't changed my situation. My hands are tied, and I'm still getting pummeled by Kazu. I have a weapon, the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment', but it's useless while I'm imprisoned here. I have no way to fight back.

...No, wait. Am I really unable to fight back?

I look at my shadow.

The 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' is still available.

It's possible to use one 'box' inside another. The fact that Maria Otonashi once slipped into another person's 'box' and remained an 'owner' proves this. I'm still an 'owner' and a [master].

But who should I use it on? I'm alone here. There's no one I could use the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' on.

"...no one here?"

Where can I find someone, then?

That goes without saying.

Outside of this 'box' I have 998 [servants] who can become my arms and legs.

"____"

It's time for a strategy session.

How can I win against Kazuki Hoshino?

I can get out of here if I destroy this 'box'. The simplest method is to [control] my [servants] and make them kill Kazu.

But that's not a true victory. While I want to defeat him, I don't want to kill him. I want to make people more ethical, so I can't commit murder, let alone force others to commit murder. This problem has nothing to do with my resolve.

I would probably be emotionally devastated if I killed him. I would be devoured by the 998 "Shadows of Sin" inside me and suffer a mental breakdown. If it turns out to be impossible to prevent the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema' from destroying my 'box' through any other means, I will have to consider killing him, but that's the absolute last resort.

I have to convince Kazu to abandon his 'box' of his own free will.

He is attacking my weak point, my past. I have to retaliate against his weak point as well.

Kazu's weak point—

"...Ah."

"It's obviously Maria Otonashi."



As if to avoid giving me any time for thought, the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema' has once again teleported me into one of the theaters.

The next movie, "60 Feet and 6 Inches Apart," will be pure torture.

Well, it won't be quite as bad this time. After all, I have invited a guest, and sorrows shared are sorrows spared.

"Don't you agree, Yuuri Yanagi?"

Yuuri Yanagi is sitting behind me to my right. Her face is pale, and she's too busy looking around in confusion to reply to my sudden, unanswerable question.

I tried to summon her here to test my assumption: as Maria Otonashi did in the 'Rejecting Classroom', it is possible for an 'owner' to interfere with other 'boxes' and intrude upon them. Of course, it's impossible to get out, so it's a one-way trip.

"Eh? Eh? Is this a cinema seat? How did I suddenly get here from the entrance?! Why am I sitting down?!"

No wonder she's startled. I'm used to the teleportation by now, but it was her first time.

It's a pain to explain it to her, though, so I'll just leave her in the dark.

"Even though you're here, the cinema still shows nothing but my past, huh. So it really is a 'box' solely intended to crush me?"

Something feels off... but I can't put my finger on it.

"I-Ignoring me...? ...Wowoa! Who are these people?! It's like their souls have been sucked out! Scary!"

Be quiet, I'm thinking.

"Shut up, bitch."

"B-Bitch?! That's downright rude! Besides, I'm innocence incarnate!"

"You must be okay if you can still crack jokes."

"...Eh? That wasn't supposed... to be a joke... W-What? C-Could it be that I'm the only who thinks that I look like a pure and innocent girl...? But I have long black hair... Wait, that doesn't matter now! Give me an explanation, please! Um, the boy sitting next to you is a friend of Kazuki-san's, right?"

"...Yeah."

A shell of Haruaki Usui, who seems to be the next lead character, is sitting beside me.

"I don't feel like explaining anything to you, so just remember one thing: do *not* make any comments about this movie - during, before, after - ever!"

Yanagi cocks her head. Of course I don't elaborate.

I have called Yanagi, one of my [servants], into the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema'.

By doing so, I confirmed several things at once. First, I can still use the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' without any restrictions. Second, even people like Yanagi who are not conventional 'owners' and just share the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' can slip into someone else's 'box'. Third, time passes at the same rate inside and outside the 'box'.

But my crucial reason for summoning her lies elsewhere.

"Yanagi. What are Kazu and Otonashi doing?"

I want to get an idea of Kazu and Otonashi's current state.

The people who share the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' can't use their invisible link to communicate directly with each other, though they can use it to convey vague feelings. I can still use my 'box', but I'm unable to issue effective orders while I don't know what's going on outside.

Therefore, I gave the following order to my [servants]:

"Find out what Kazu and Otonashi are doing."

Since it's impossible to get detailed info mind-to-mind, I'm forced to ask someone directly.

That's why Yanagi is here now—she's a messenger.

".....Do I have to tell you?"

"You don't seem to understand your position yet."

Using my 'box', I stimulate her feelings of guilt.

"U, ah! Nnnn!nh—"

I only meant to give her a light push, but she groans bitterly and looks up at me with teary eyes, begging me to stop.

Like Shindou, she has committed the sin of murder during the 'Game of Idleness'. It's only natural that she can't escape her feelings of guilt from the grave sin of betraying Kazu. That's why she's suffering so much.

"A-Above all, Kazuki-san seems to want to keep Otonashi-san from getting involved. Thus, he's hiding his actions from her."

"I knew it... But why is Otonashi playing along? I don't think she would listen obediently to Kazu when there's a 'box' right under her nose."

"I don't know anything about that..."

"Sluts like you are good at jerking others around, right? So just for reference: what would *you* do to keep Otonashi from acting?"

"A-Aren't you being a bit too cruel?!W-Well, anyways. Mm, I don't think he could convince Otonashi-san with honesty, so he must be lying to her. For example, he could make her believe that he had come up with a good strategy and tell her that they'd pull it off some other time."

"Would Otonashi really buy such a fishy story?"

"I think she would believe anything he says because she trusts Kazuki-san blindly."

"...I see."

Certainly, Otonashi would try to believe in Kazu, no matter how cheap his lies. Which means it's surprisingly simple for Kazu to deceive her.

"Not bad, Yanagi. I have to admit that I used to think I was an expert manipulator, but you're the Queen of Lies."

"...Um, that's not praise, right? You're actually insulting me, right?"

"Of course."

"...Oomine-san, you sure seem to like insulting me. Could it be that you're actually quite fond of me?"

"Huh? Don't screw with me, bitch. You look like a goddamn bog body."

"B-Bog body...? Now that's an original insult... I have no idea how to react..."

Yanagi deliberately pulls back and musses up her long, straight black hair – which, combined with her pale, pale skin, normally causes her to vaguely resemble some kind of specter. She says, "And now?"

Of course I ignore her.

"But I learned something thanks to you."

"Eh? Did you find a clue on my forehead?"

"It says 'die.'"

"Ew... how heartless..."

"I learned that Kazu is definitely taking advantage of their mutual trust."

The trust between Maria Otonashi and Kazuki Hoshino is already hollow, and Kazu is hiding that fact from her.

Even worse, he is exploiting her trust.

"Now I know how to bring Otonashi here."

Finding such an easy solution makes me smile.

"I just have to show her the truth."

I just have to make her realize that their goals have diverged.

Once she learns of his betrayal, they are over.

Kazu will lose and I will win.

An image appears on the screen, followed by a transition to a scene featuring a middle school-aged Haruaki. He is wearing a familiar uniform...

The smell of peppermint. Whenever that scent appears, I assume that I'm in Maria's room.

While lying on the bed, I raise my head to look at the time. The first movie, "Close-Up Goodbye," is already about to end.

My victory is all but assured by now. Daiya is confined to the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema'. By the time it finishes showing its movies, Daiya will have had to abandon his 'box'. All I have to do is bide my time.

Of course, I still won't let my guard down - my opponent is Daiya, after all. He is able to use his 'box' within the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema'. I already know that he can control people, so he can use them to attack us.

Maria calls out to me, "Kazuki, help me get dinner ready."

I double check on my expression. I can't let her pick up on what I'm doing behind her back.

Relax, Kazuki.

"Okay, coming."

I get up and head to the kitchen. When she sees me, Maria cracks a lopsided smile.

"Jeez, now look at that dull face."

"...Eh?"

"You should know that we're under pressure because Oomine has returned as an 'owner', right? How can you still be so relaxed?"

"Sorry."

Thank goodness. Maria thinks that I'm no different from normal.

She hasn't seen through my faked expression.

We've made hamburger steak and placed them on two simple plates. Maria used to have no interest in cooking, but she's really gotten into it lately. Aprons no longer look out of place on her body.

"Kazuki," she says as I pick up the plates. "Here's an extra cherry tomato."

She smiles mischievously and holds out the cherry tomato, ignoring my fully occupied hands.

"U-Ummm...?"

"Eat it."

Like that...? While holding the plates, I tilt my head forward and peck at the tomato like a chick.

Her fingers almost pop into my mouth, but she seems to be enjoying it.

She plucks the stem with her fingers and continues chatting while watching me chew:

"Silly."

"...Isn't that a mean thing to say when you made me do it?"

"You're silly because you do anything I tell you to without question."

Still smiling, she turns around to finish up our dinner. I leave the kitchen and put the plates on the table.

"....."

Yeah, I know: this peaceful moment is only possible because I'm deceiving Maria.

Taking advantage of her blind trust in me, I am deceiving and betraying her. But I have no other choice.

I want to be with her forever.

Maria, however, doesn't share my wish. No... she thinks that it's selfish of her to make that wish.

Wanting to grant others' 'wishes' and even calling herself a 'box', Maria prioritizes others over herself. No, I'm putting it too mildly. She is trying to make others happy by devoting herself to them so completely that it borders on self-abnegation. By restricting her own desires, she is trying to abandon "Maria Otonashi" and become "Aya Otonashi"—a being that exists solely for the purpose of granting the 'wishes' of others.

I won't let that happen.

I will kill the "Aya Otonashi" hiding within Maria.

But I mustn't let her get wind of my plans yet. If that happened, she would definitely disappear. So, I have to deceive her until the last possible moment.

But—

When will that be?

How long will I have to continue lying to her?

"Kazuki," Maria says, giving me a start - for a second there, I thought that she had caught me in my own web of lies. "The rice bowls are ready. Can you take them back over there?"

"O-Okay."

"...? Is something wrong?"

"Ah, no... never mind."

I don't think I'm good at hiding things. I won't be able to hide the fact that I've changed forever.

Rather, the end is near.

"Then move your butt over here and get the rice bowls."

"Yeah, comin—"

My cell phone rings.

I immediately whip it out.

"....."

It's an e-mail from Haruaki.

"Yuuri Yanagi has moved."

There are no smilies or anything like that in his straightforward e-mail. He probably typed it in a rush.

Yuuri-san—one of the people Daiya controls; a pawn of Daiya's, so to speak.

And that pawn has just moved.

"I-I'm sorry, Maria! I've got some urgent business to take care of!"

"...? What are you talking about? Is it so urgent that you can't even have dinner with me?"

"I'm sorry!"

Without missing a beat, I rush out of the apartment. Behind me, I hear Maria telling me to stop, but I can't do that. I quickly jump into the elevator and immediately shut the door so that Maria can't catch up.

I guess she'll be suspicious. She might link my urgent business with the 'boxes'.

However, I have told her that we will defeat Daiya tomorrow.

And Maria believes me.

"....."

While resisting my pangs of remorse, I give Haruaki a call.



I head out to meet with Haruaki.

While speeding along the darkened streets, an old conversation I had with Haruaki runs through my mind.

—I had a crush on Kiri.

The day after Daiya had returned to school, Haruaki told me that.

I had just explained the 'boxes' to him. After deciding to fight against Daiya, I had decided that Haruaki had to be in on the battle. It was early evening, just about the time when kids headed home after playing all day. We were in a park, and Haruaki was sitting on a loudly creaking swing.

"———"

After I was done, he remained silent for a while, swaying back and forth on the swing. For a few moments, all I could hear was the squeaking of the swing.

His violent movements almost threw him through a full 360 degree arc. I felt sorry for involving Haruaki, but it was a decision I had made after thoroughly considering all of my options. I had no regrets. That's what I told myself, anyway.

That was when he told me: "I had a crush on Kiri."

He confessed that he used to be in love with Kokone, all of a sudden and without any context. Was it meant to counter my tale?

"Eh...?"

I was surprised at first, but it made sense.

Haruaki had turned down all the offers he received from renowned baseball schools in favor of our high school, yet our inferior baseball program barely allowed him to aim for the national championship. He had sacrificed his future career as a professional baseball player. I knew this because Maria had found out about it within the repeating world, and then told me about it later.

I had always wondered why he had done so.

And now I knew why.

Haruaki chose to go to the same school as Daiya and Kokone, even if he had to give up on his dreams and his prospects. I don't know if he wanted to declare his love eventually or if he had some other goal, but he found it necessary.

The swing had come to a halt, and Haruaki was now standing up. He continued:

"Oh, but you know? I don't have those feelings for her anymore. Mmm, how should I put it? She used to be terribly insecure and fragile, and seemed to need someone to protect her. I wanted to be that person, you see!"

He swung himself gently to the creaking of the swing.

"But you can't protect someone with such a half-assed resolve. Jeez, can you believe how presumptuous I was?"

His tone was light, but I'm sure he had to go through a lot before reaching that conclusion.

"So you're really not in love with her anymore?"

"Yeah. So don't mind me if you want to go out with Kiri, Hoshii! You guys would make a good match."

I don't know if he was being honest.

All I know is that he's not attached to any girl in particular. He's never said anything, but I'm pretty sure that he's popular with the girls—especially from other schools—because he's a baseball ace. He was confessed to by several girls, and he even dated some of them. However, most of those relationships ended very quickly. He no longer accepts confessions anymore.

I can only guess at how he felt while dating them, how they broke up, or why he stopped accepting confessions.

But I'm sure that Kokone and Daiya played a role.

"What about Daiya?"

"Mm?"

"Don't you think that Daiya and Kokone should go out?"

Haruaki didn't answer right away. He stopped swinging and waited for the swing to come to a standstill. Before all momentum was lost, he jumped from the swing with a "Ho!", landed, and said point-blank:

"No."

"Why not? Aren't they a—"

"Unlike me, Daiya is able to make a resolution that's not half-assed."

He probably read my face - what the heck are you talking about - and continued with a wry smile:

"Because of that, they can't be happy together."

I couldn't understand right away.

"That's not love! Their relationship just isn't healthy."

At the time, I had no knowledge of their childhood experiences, so his words left me confused.

But I knew someone who resembled Daiya.

Someone who sacrificed her own happiness for the sake of others'.

So I instinctively understood that their relationship was messed up and had already ended.

"Then why did you give up on Kokone? If you think Daiya's out of the picture, why hold back?"

"You're completely missing the point. I'm not holding back! Didn't you listen at all? There's just no need to protect her anymore! My feelings have already changed!"

"...Has Kokone gotten strong enough to protect herself?"

"That's not what I said."

"Huh?"

"She's still as weak as before! People can't change so easily, after all. But there is no need to protect her anymore. Because—"

That moment, Haruaki made an expression I had never seen before on his face.

It wasn't anger, hatred, or pity. With a smile that gave me the chills, he said:

"Kiri *is* already broken."

Later, I realized what feeling had been buried behind his smile.

It was—

Resignation.



Haruaki was waiting for me at that same park. It was only two to three minutes from Maria's apartment on foot. This time around, it was completely dark.

Haruaki and Yuuri-san were sitting on a bench, illuminated by a streetlight.

"Kazuki-san..."

Yuuri-san looks up at me with teary eyes. I still feel sorry for her, but I don't get upset at the sight of her tears anymore. After all, I've been putting up with her constant crying for a while now. I've gotten completely used to her broken tear ducts.

Yuuri-san is sitting obediently on the bench of her own free will. Haruaki told me over the phone that when he approached her, she chose to listen to him.

"Haruaki, just to confirm: what was she doing?"

"Well, like I told you, she was strolling about near Maria-chan's apartment. She didn't resist or lose her temper, either, and she even explained the situation that she's in! Apparently, she was [controlled] by Daiya to spy on what you and Maria-chan are doing."

"Mm."

I already expected this. I knew that Daiya would use the people he can [control] to spy on us because he can't leave that cinema.

That being said—

"Yuuri-san. Is it really okay to tell us what Daiya ordered you to do?"

After all, doing so hinders Daiya.

"Yes, it is. I can't say for sure, but I think his 'box' isn't powerful enough to completely dominate me."

My heart aches when I hear the word 'box' coming from her mouth. Even though she'd been lucky enough to forget about the 'boxes', she's now forced to remember them. And the more vivid the memory becomes, the more she will blame herself.

But now is not the time to pity Yuuri-san. For the time being, I have to suck her dry of information.

"Yuuri-san, could you go into detail about what you know?"

"Yes... Ah, please remember that I cannot hide anything from Oomine-san. If he [commands] me to speak, I must obey. So be careful what you say to me."

"Okay, I understand."

But is it really okay for her to tell me even that? I guess she hasn't become Daiya's ally just because he used his 'box' on her.

"You were [controlled] by Daiya to spy on me and Maria, correct?"

"Right. We were [ordered] to find out what you have done to him and what you are going to do next. Moreover, he [ordered] those who have discovered something new to enter the 'box' that he's imprisoned in."

"Daiya told you to enter the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema'?"

Does that mean that his [servants] can't directly convey their discoveries to him?

"How do you experience such an [order], Yuuri-san? As far as I can see, your mind seems perfectly clear, and you don't seem brainwashed, either."

"Yes, it is nothing like brainwashing. Most likely, I am merely forced to obey his [orders]."

"How powerful are they? And what happens if you reject one?"

"...I don't know exactly what would happen if I ignored one of his [orders]. Perhaps there will be no penalty at all, but as a matter of principle, I cannot defy him."

"Is it absolutely impossible to avoid obeying his orders?"

"It is. And that probably applies to every [servant]. It feels a bit like my... soul is being held captive. The thought of disobeying him feels like throwing my life away."

"I see... Why didn't you resist Haruaki, then, when he approached you? Doesn't that mean that you disobeyed Daiya? Why were you able to do that?"

Yuuri-san uneasily casts her eyes to the ground.

"If Haruaki-san weren't a friend of yours, I might have tried to escape."

"What do you mean?"

"My [order] was to spy on you and Otonashi-san, so getting caught by a friend of yours and waiting for you to come here is in accordance with my instructions."

So, basically...

"You're talking with me because of your [order]?"

It's certainly true that she can gather information on me this way.

Yuuri-san gives me a faint, apologetic nod.

"But please believe me: as you may have noticed, we are not bereft of will. We are merely given instructions that we have to follow. Thus, I am still your Yuuri," she says as she takes my hand and looks into my eyes. "I am still on your side."

I feel the warmth of her hands, which naturally makes me blush.

...Yeah, indeed. Yuuri-san's always getting me all flustered, and I can never tell if she's doing it deliberately or not.

"One thing's bothering me a little," Haruaki says as he breaks his silence. "You aren't the only one who's spying on Hoshii - other people are on the move as well, right?"

Yuuri-san has been saying "we".

In order to collect information, moving a single person would not be optimal. If possible, Daiya would [order] several people at a time.

Yuuri-san tightens her grip on my hands and answers the question.

"Yes. I think the [order] has gone to all [servants]."

"To... all?"

"Yes, to all."

—What does that mean for me? I mean, there's a large number of [servants] in our school alone.

And all of them are after us...?!

"...How many [servants] are there?"

"...Almost a thousand."

"A, thou———"

I'm left speechless.

I imagine being surrounded by a thousand people in this park, getting cornered and yelled at to spit out everything. To confess everything.

The YouTube video of people in the city prostrating themselves before Daiya, submitting to him, crosses my mind.

There were just ten or so people involved that time. Despite that, the sight had enough impact to make it onto TV. He made such a strong impression that after seeing it, my sister Luu-chan even asked whether people like him

would revolutionize the world. There must have been many others who had similar thoughts after seeing the video.

Most likely, Daiya merely gave them the [order] to "prostrate themselves before him with tears in their eyes."

He achieved a huge impact just by doing that.

But Daiya is able to make a thousand people do the same thing.

I once saw a TV report on group psychology that dealt with the following question: how many strangers on a crowded street have to look up at the sky before other pedestrians start to look up, even though there's nothing to see?

The answer is three. If there are three people looking up at the sky, you suspect there *is* something there and are tempted to look up as well. Then, someone else sees you and the original three people looking up and also starts looking up. Through this herding effect, a large number of people end up looking up at the sky for no good reason.

A mere three individuals can have that powerful an impact.

Now, what if a thousand people were to act in tandem?

For example, if a thousand people rushed to the same restaurant, you could easily start a trend. If you found a blog that upset you, you could easily terrorize the writer psychologically by making them attack him over the web. No... these ideas are still fairly trivial. You don't need a thousand people to execute them.

A thousand people would be able to wield power that exceeds the grasp of my imagination.

Besides, that number isn't the maximum that Daiya can [control], so he can still increase his power even further.

Ugh, I'm starting to realize just how powerful his 'box' is.

Without exaggeration, Daiya's 'box' does have the power to change the world.

And right now—

—He is using that power just to defeat me.

Before I knew it, my fingers have started to tremble.

"...Yuuri-san? How specific was that [order]? From what I gathered, Daiya didn't give you detailed instructions, right," I ask while keeping my uneasiness in check.

"Yes, there were no specific instructions, so we can choose how to follow his [order]. Also, we won't do anything that goes against our moral values. We're all doing our best to execute the [order] to the extent that it's feasible. I don't know what apartment Otonashi-san lives in, but I happen to know that she lives in that apartment block, which is why I came here."

"...Umm."

I think about what Yuuri-san has just told me.

"So for example, if you knew what room she's in, you wouldn't be able to intrude by breaking the window because you think doing so is wrong?"

"Exactly."

So is the power of [orders] surprisingly restricted?

I stop and shake my head before I start relaxing. No. I can't feel relieved: *Yuuri-san* may not be able to break in, but there might be others who can.

...After all, there are people who readily break windows without requiring an [order]..... like Maria...or Maria...or Maria.^[3]

"Okay, Yuuri-san, now I understand why you're in this park. Also, let me confirm one thing: you said you were able to come here because you knew which apartment block Maria lives in, right? Does that mean that the others can't get here because they don't know of her location?"

"Yes. They cannot get here."

"...Can't you share information among [servants]?"

"No... it feels like we are connected somewhere deep in our minds... but our actual thoughts are not connected. Therefore, my knowledge of Otonashi-san's whereabouts is not conveyed to them."

"But guys," Haruaki suddenly cuts in with a frown. "Why would you need any special abilities to share information? I mean, couldn't you just use your cell phone?"

Yuuri-san's eyes widen at his question.

"Y-You're right. Why didn't I notice? ...Oh no... I can do that, actually...," she stutters and pales. "Now that you gave me that idea, I have to do it."

She takes out her cell phone.

"Eh?"

Yuuri-san? What are you doing?

Is she trying to get in touch with...? But didn't she just say she was on my side?

But as a matter of fact, Yuuri-san has started typing on her cell phone with widened eyes and trembling lips.

In order to defeat me.

Before I can get a grip on what's going on, she writes an e-mail and is about to send it when Haruaki suddenly grabs her from behind.

"Ugh...!"

She accidentally drops her cell phone.

"Dammit! Sorry Hoshii! My bad!"

"...eh, huh?"

"Don't you get it, Hoshii? Yuuri-senpai told us about the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' even though it puts Daiyan at a disadvantage. She is able to oppose him to a certain extent, so she is trying to help us as much as she can. But she still has to take the best measures that she's aware of to complete her [order]. Right, Yuuri-senpai?"

She nods slightly while gazing at me with tears in her eyes.

"Exactly. Oh my... what, what should I do...?"

"You're powerless against me physically, so I can hold you back like this if you want," Haruaki suggests.

"N-No, I think it's pointless if you stop me. It merely slipped my mind that I could have gotten in touch with the others, but someone else is bound to come up with the same idea. If someone locates Otonashi-san, that person will call or email another [servant]. After that, it's just a matter of time. The information will spread further and further...!"

"Uh, I see. You're right... Hoshii, some [servant] might already know Maria-chan's address. You should take off."

"B-But..."

If I do that, Maria will surely realize that I am in the middle of a fight against Daiya and his 'box'. I must avoid that at any cost.

But could we even get away from the [servants]?

I mean, a thousand people are searching for us.

On a whim, I open up a browser window and search for my name.

The result of the real-time search makes me go pale.

"RT: (IMPORTANT) student Kazuki Hoshino and Maria Otonashi missing - last will found by his sister. Report if you see them. Details in 2nd tweet."^[4]

"Wha—"

What is that?

Even my home address is being referenced on the Internet. The twitter page of the original tweeter is practically empty before that tweet; he has obviously registered just to post that message. In addition, he has even uploaded a picture of me and Maria on her motorcycle.

In part due to Maria's looks, his tweets have spread rapidly in the short time since they were posted. Some tweeters have expressed doubts as to the legitimacy of the tweet, but that doesn't matter: people will blindly spread the message under the rationale of "searching for missing students."

Maybe some of the [servants] have already seen that tweet?

I unconsciously raise my head and look around.

I see a business woman strolling along and staring at her cell phone, a middle-aged man taking his dog for a walk, and a cap-wearing middle school student riding a bicycle.

—my eyes meet with the student's.

...Maybe that student is looking for me, too. Maybe he has read that tweet, too. Maybe he's a [servant]. It would come as no surprise if that boy called a thousand other people to close in on us.

My thoughts cause me to freeze.

Fortunately, the boy averts his gaze without any special reaction.

"———Ugh."

Why am I frightened of a middle school boy...?

...But I can't dismiss it as a mere overreaction, either. It's a fact that there are a lot of [servants] around. On top of that, they are random people that don't stand out, unlike uniformed policemen for example.

"...Yuuri-san...," I say while hiding my uneasiness. "You said that it's impossible to do things that are against your moral values, right? So would you be able to intrude upon us if we locked ourselves into Maria's room?"

"I can't. But there might be less moral people among the [servants]. No... I'm afraid there definitely are some. There are also fanatical believers in

Oomine-san. I think they would do anything for the sake of his [orders], so they could break into an apartment without a second thought..."

So it's possible that someone, upon reading that tweet, will go to my home and attack my family?

"You or Otonashi-san... might be tortured...!"

Close to tears, Yuuri-san struggles to free herself from Haruaki and send her e-mail.

I guess she really doesn't want to contact anyone, but it doesn't look like she's able to stop herself. Probably because the act of e-mailing someone in and of itself doesn't violate her ethics, even though it may have some less than innocent consequences. Otherwise, she wouldn't even be keeping an eye on us.

That's how powerful an [order] is.

"...just how can I..."

We are pursued by a thousand people. They're all racking their brains in order to catch Maria and me and gather information on us.

It's just a matter of time. We won't be able to hang on until the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema' is over.

...Ah, no, it's much worse. The current situation where a thousand people are investigating us is still fairly innocuous.

If Daiya fails to get the information he wants, he won't stick to the same [order] forever. He has a time limit. If he runs out of time, he'll take a more direct approach. The current [order] is just an initial move—a tentative move with his "pawns" to catch a glimpse of my reaction.

"Yuuri-san?"

If there's no progress, Daiya will use a more effective and certain way to get out of the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema'.

Namely—

"What if he [orders] you to kill me?"

—Killing the 'owner'.

That's obviously immoral. Something that shouldn't be possible according to her explanation.

Nonetheless, Yuuri-san replies firmly. "I would kill you."

"...Why would you be able to do that?"

I think I already understand, but I want her to confirm it for me.

"An [order] itself has to be executed no matter what. Our moral values make no difference at all. For example, the current [order] was to find what you're doing. We are forced to obey, but the means we use are at our discretion. I consider trespassing a crime, so I can refrain from doing so. But if the [order] itself were to break into her apartment, I would be left with no other choice. Moral values become irrelevant."

The more concrete Daiya makes his [orders], the mightier his [control] becomes. The current [order] was only vague because he lacks insight into the overall situation.

At the moment, he may want to avoid murder, but he might resort to it if cornered.

If that happens, I'll be pursued by a thousand killers.

I have to do something.

What's my best option...?

".....Yuuri-san."

Still restrained by Haruaki's hold, she raises her head.

"I'll tell you everything about our current situation."

"Eh?"

The cry of astonishment came from Haruaki.

"Are you serious, Hoshii? [Servants] who have discovered something have to go to Daiyan! If he gets more info, his attacks will definitely get more intense!"

"I have no other choice. Besides... I bet Daiya has already guessed with high precision what Maria and I are doing right now. In that case, it's better to give him an appropriate amount of information and have him think that it's not that hard for him to escape."

That way, he won't have to resort to killing the 'owner'.

"There's one more reason. I want to send Yuuri-san into the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema'."

"Eh?"

Still held down by Haruaki's arms, Yuuri-san widens her eyes

"You don't like Daiya, right, Yuuri-san?"

She remains still for a moment... but then, perhaps guessing what I am getting at, she lifts the corner of her mouth slightly.

"That's right. I hate him."

Knowing that she's going to get a piece of information, she stops struggling against Haruaki. With a face that looks almost pleased, she continues:

"I will never forgive him for killing me and exposing my hideous corpse to you in that killer game. If I can discover his emotional scars, I want to twist a knife in them, make him feel intense pain and agony, and drive him to suicide."

...Uh, well... I never asked for all that...and you're freaking me out...and hell, Haruaki has even let go of you because what you said was so alarming...

"...A-Anyway, you're on my side, right?"

"Yes."

Yuuri-san is quite cunning and clever, despite her cute appearance. She's also got plenty of guts.

In other words: she's a Trojan Horse.

If she's with Daiya, she can hinder his actions.

After that, I told Yuuri-san that I was deceiving Maria.

I also told her to go to the shopping mall in order to enter the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema'. She told me that she already instinctively knew that because Daiya had used the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' on her. Supposedly, his 'box' is shared, and I should consider her to be 'owner'-like.

I don't know why, but when I heard that, I couldn't help thinking that—it resembles Maria's 'box' a little.

It's hard to explain just why I felt that way, but if I had to say something, "they give off a similar feeling" is probably the best answer that I can come up with.

They are based on strong emotions, yet they are cold and fragile, and I can't understand their underlying motives. They are 'boxes' whose meanings I cannot grasp.

Probably because of that line of thought, a new idea crosses my mind.

Ah, could it be that—
the one who understands her best is no longer me, but—
Daiya Oomine?

I shake my head.

Why am I suddenly getting off track?

I should be thinking about Daiya's plans instead.

"Hey, Hoshii," Haruaki opens his mouth. "Daiya will go for Kiri!"

Right. I think so, too.

Therefore—

Right now I have to protect Kokone - not Maria.



Scene 3

『Repeat, Repeat,
Reset』

(20:30~22:00)

scene 3: Repeat, Reset, Reset

- **1. CLASSROOM**

- Classroom of the first year high school students, class six; after school. It's the 1533rd iteration of the 'Rejecting Classroom'. Outside the windows, the sky is as cloudy as it was during the first 1532 iterations. MARIA OTONASHI is sitting on the teacher's desk and talking to DAIYA OOMINE.
- He has guessed that MARIA is more than just a regular transfer student and seems to be wary of her.
 - DAIYA
 - ...Don't look at me. I don't like your gaze. It feels like you could see right through me.
 - MARIA
 - That's closer to the truth than you may think. After all, I know far more than a normal transfer student could ever know on her first day. I've checked up on every single one of my classmates in search of the 'owner' of the 'Rejecting Classroom'.
- DAIYA flashes a sardonic smile and takes on a mocking stance.
 - DAIYA
 - You're not making any sense. But let me ask you then: what do you know?
 - MARIA
 - I know what's on Kokone Kirino's back.
- DAIYA's face visibly tenses up.
 - DAIYA
 - ...How do you know about that? If there's anything that Kiri would never show *anyone*, it's that. Even I've only seen it once. ...Hey, don't tell me you're one of the people who hurt her?
 - MARIA
 - It's the 22nd time.
 - DAIYA
 - What is?

- MARIA
 - It's the 22nd time that you asked me that question after hearing about Kokone Kirino's back.
- DAIYA frowns.
- He doesn't remember posing that question before. As the only person who can retain her memories of the 'Rejecting Classroom', MARIA is also the only remaining witness.
- The memories of the time she has spent alone cross MARIA's mind and cause her to sigh in exhaustion.

- MARIA
 - Let me explain how I found out. First off, I have already... (TIME LAPSE)
- MARIA tells DAIYA that she has experienced the same March 2nd 1533 times. For a while, DAIYA listens quietly to what she says without saying a word.

- DAIYA
 - I see. You mentioned Kiri's back because you wanted me to believe your absurd story. But girl, you could have hired a detective or whatever to investigate Kiri's background.
- MARIA
 - Do you want me to bring up an event that only you and one other person know about?
- DAIYA
 - ...What?
- MARIA
 - Your childhood friend Miyuki Karino confessed to you, but you rejected her.
- DAIYA's eyes widen at first, but he quickly suppresses his bewilderment.
- DAIYA
 - Indeed, that's something only Rino and I know about. I haven't told anyone else, and I'm sure she hasn't, either. It's impossible to discover using ordinary means.
- MARIA
 - I guess so. I wouldn't have found out if you hadn't told me yourself.

- DAIYA
- Impossible. Whether that 'Rejecting Classroom' really exists or not, I would never tell anyone about that.
 - MARIA
- It makes sense that you would never do so under normal circumstances. You even said that yourself: that you never intended to tell anyone about the incident that led to Kirino's suffering.
- DAIYA scowls sternly at MARIA because she has mentioned a sore topic. His firm gaze disturbs MARIA, but she shows no sign of concern. She had already perfectly mastered concealing her emotions before the number of iterations hit four digits.
 - MARIA
- There's a reason you told me.
 - DAIYA
- Bullshit! I'm 100% certain there's no way I would have told you about that incident!
- His vehement objections cause MARIA to shrink back slightly, but she pretends to be unaffected and continues speaking.
 - MARIA
- You told me about your darkest secret because you wanted to assist me. It was on the 1532nd iteration of March 2nd.
 - DAIYA
- Are you nuts? To assist you? If you want to lie, at least make your lies believable!
 - MARIA
- A 'box' can grant any 'wish'.
 - DAIYA
- ...So what?
 - MARIA
- Your demeanor changed when you realized that everything I had told you about the 'boxes' is true. You should know why, right? You have a 'wish' that you want to fulfill no matter what.
 - DAIYA
-(wrinkles his brow)

- MARIA
- Looks like you have a hunch, huh. You want a 'box', so in exchange for your help, you asked me to help you get one.
- DAIYA
- ...(ponders)...But since I'm such a huge skeptic, I'd never buy that story about those 'boxes' and that 'Rejecting Classroom' so easily. Thus, I told you something you couldn't otherwise know—something about me and Rino—in order to give you leverage so that I'd believe you. To let a future me—that is, the 1553rd me—know that you're telling the truth.
- MARIA
- You got it.
- DAIYA
- ...Tch... I don't want to admit it, but that cold-blooded, results-oriented approach is totally me.
- Inwardly relieved, MARIA gets off the teacher's desk.
- She had sat on the desk to give herself a more powerful presence, but her good breeding made her uncomfortable while sitting there.
- DAIYA
- Now I know where I stand, but what about you? What do you get from telling me about this?
- MARIA
- I can make you my partner.
- DAIYA
- Do you really need one?
- MARIA
- You see, I'm stuck. I need to change my approach.
- DAIYA
- So if you need a partner, why did you choose me?
- MARIA
- That's just a rhetorical question, isn't it? You're the smartest person in this class. So much so that you were the first person I suspected of being the 'owner', even though there were no other reasons to suspect you. You're not on my suspect list anymore though,

because you completely lack the awareness of being an 'owner'.

- DAIYA

- Smart, huh. Well, you're right about that, but that's still a pretty weak reason for insisting that I become your partner. I bet you've found yourself a bunch of other partners too, taking advantage of the fact that we don't remember anything, right? What a partner slut you are!

- MARIA

- Don't worry. I can't say anything about the future, but you're my first partner. You're also the first one I felt like cooperating with. Probably because—
 - MARIA hesitates for a moment, but then she continues.
 - MARIA
 - You resemble me.
-

◆◆◆ Daiya Oomine - 09/11 FRI 20:01 ◆◆◆

Just to be clear: my target is Maria Otonashi.

If Kazu is under the impression that I were still hung up on Kiri, and thinks that I would go for her first before Maria, then it will be a breeze to defeat him.

That doesn't mean that I can relax now, though.

"—U...ghk!" I groan at the entrance.

Watching "60 Feet and 6 Inches Apart" in the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema' has without a doubt worn me out.

...I never knew.

I never thought for a single second that Haruaki had a romantic interest in Kiri. I always thought that he sacrificed his baseball career in order to attend our high school because he couldn't ignore what had happened to Kiri. I didn't know that love was involved.

Yeah. I didn't just mess up Kiri's life, I also screwed up Haruaki's. I'm boldly enjoying my life even though I have ruined others'.

".....Stop that."

—Stop thinking like that, me!

If I blame myself, I will once again be attacked by the "Shadows of Sin" within me. They lie in eternal wait for an opportunity to turn the tables on me. One unguarded moment and they'll pounce.

"Ugh!"

I get a sudden and fierce fit of nausea. ...I have to resist. If I give in to the urge to vomit, I feel as if I'll throw up my soul.

I have to swallow it.

I have to swallow everything.

"How cruel," Yanagi says while rubbing my back. "If you had given up on Kirino-san and left her to Usui-san, things wouldn't have ended like that."

".....Hah?"

"I often visit your classroom to see Kazuki-san, and Kirino-san and Usui-san are always cheerful. But they were just pretending to be happy for your sake, no? They have to act cheerful because they just can't relax anymore, right?"

With a soft smile, she rubs my back and continues.

"It's all for your sake, isn't it?"

I can grasp the meaning... of that sentence.

—THEY HAVE BECOME LIKE THAT BECAUSE OF YOU!

Exactly. Exactlyexactlyexactly...exactly.

Discomfort crawls through my skull like a bug and makes my eyes sting. The mocking smile of the girl before me irritates me. I don't care if she's right or not, her smile pisses me off.

The moment I think that—

I started strangling her.

"——— Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

I can't recognize what I'm screaming.

My body, my arms, my throat are all moving on their own, almost as if something has taken control of me. I am moving automatically. But I know that I'm the one who has taken over...I have been overtaken by myself.

"Agha!"

Upon hearing Yanagi's groan as it leaks out and seeing her ashen face, I finally regain control of myself.

I hurriedly remove my hands from her neck.

Yanagi collapses to the ground and falls into a coughing fit.

"Uh, gh—"

I look closely at my hands.

What the fuck...? What is wrong with me? Readily strangling a girl... that's just insane. Had I regained control a few moments later, this would have ended horribly.

All too well do I realize that—only by the tiniest of margins have I avoided making a grave mistake.

I touch the piercing in my right ear.

Ah, fuck, stop obsessing over pointless things. I can't turn back anymore. I have no time to panic over some stray thoughts.

I have to return to my old self. I have to return to being cool and calculating.

"Yanagi," I say while feigning composure.

She scowls at me with tears in her eyes.

"Do you seriously think that I haven't realized?"

After coughing a few times, she asks, "...What, are you talking about?"

"What you said just now was intended to make me suffer for Kazu's sake."

She freezes for a split second.

"...? What do you mean? I have no idea what you're talking about."

She immediately plays the innocent and puts on a puzzled face, as if she really didn't know what I meant.

I'm more amazed than angered. What a cunning girl. If I hadn't been aware of her true nature, I would have been completely fooled.

"Kazu sent you here to give me a hard time, didn't he?"

".....," she stays silent for long enough for me to notice that she's studying my face. "I have no idea what you mean. I was forced to come here because of your [order], Oomine-san. How would Kazuki-san have any influence over that?"

Hmph, I guess I'll go with that.

"I've been expecting you all along."

This time she can't help but widen her eyes.

"W-Why? It's much more likely that someone else finds out something first! After all, there are almost a thousand other [servants] besides me!"

"It's Kazu we're talking about; I bet he has begun observing you as soon as you became a [servant]. After getting noticed, you told him what [order] I gave you, and made him realize that my [orders] can't be stopped. Now, what would he do? It's dead-easy to imagine: he would deliberately give you information to prevent my [orders] from escalating. On top of that, he would want to hurt me by sending someone who's on his side. You're ideally suited for that role. For one thing, you're cunning, and above all, you've got a crush on him and are easy to control," I sneer and continue.

"How's that? Am I right?"

Yanagi doesn't answer.

"Well, even if you don't want to reply, you will if I [order] you to. But there's no need for that. Your attitude alone speaks volumes."

"Uh..."

"I admit that Kazu's uniquely capable. But when it comes to tactics he stands no chance against me. In the end, he's just dancing to my tune."

He sent Yanagi to me as a spy in order to defend himself and attack me.

But he doesn't understand yet that using others is risky. As the possessor of the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment', I now understand the dark currents of people's hearts better than anyone else.

That's why Kazu will lose this battle.

"Yanagi, you like Kazu, right?"

"...S-So what?"

"If possible, you want him to reciprocate your feelings, right?"

"Well... I suppose so..."

It looks like she doesn't understand why I've brought up that topic.

"I have a plan that will make him care for you."

"....."

Crafty as she is, Yanagi seems to have realized what I'm getting at.

"Kazu and Otonashi's relationship is extremely strong. Normally, it would be impossible to destroy it. That won't change even if you help him out. You know that, right?"

"...What are you trying to say?" she asks, even though she knows the answer already.

I'll make it cut and dried for her.

"Betray him."

Yanagi keeps a straight face.

"I've been planning to tear their relationship apart anyway in order to shatter Kazu's goal. You and I have the same interests."

Yanagi keeps silent for a while, but then she scowls at me.

"What are you talking about? I don't care about interests and the like. Why would I side with a person who killed me in that game and strangled me just now? Do you seriously think that I would betray the one I love for you?"

"...Do you think that Kazu's current situation is in his best interests?"

"Don't change the subject, please. I know you're good at twisting things around."

"You don't think so, do you? His bending his own ideals to obtain a 'box' and having 'O' constantly hover nearby *can't* be good for him."

"Don't ignore me."

"Who's to blame? Who made him like that?"

"...Listen to,"

"Maria Otonashi."

Yanagi swallows her objection upon hearing that name.

I continue after closely examining her reaction.

"He's fighting me right now because of Otonashi. Because he's obsessed with her, he chose to meddle with a 'box' and get in my way. Let me make this clear: I don't care about Kazu. I don't have the slightest intent to kill him, nor do I want to defeat him. In fact, I would like for him to become happy. I mean, I have nothing against him, right?"

"....."

"If Otonashi disappears, he won't have a reason to oppose me anymore, and he will be released from the 'boxes'. Right: his current actions won't ultimately lead to his true happiness. For the sake of his happiness, it doesn't even matter if he beats me or not. So how can you remedy the situation in his favor?"

I get to the point.

"Otonashi has to be distanced from Kazu. Once that happens, he will be able to live his own life."

"....."

"He will be able to become happy."

".....But Kazuki-san doesn't wish for that."

Yanagi has replied to my words at last.

I'm rejoicing internally, but of course I conceal my glee from Yanagi.

"His wishes are not necessarily in his own best interest. Otonashi doesn't believe in what he's doing either, but Kazu is convinced that his actions are for her benefit. ...Yes, you are 'helping Kazu to work for Otonashi,' so to speak."

I chose that wording because I guessed that she's not too fond of Otonashi.

"Do you agree with Kazu?"

"That's..."

"Now let me repeat myself: we have the same interests. Well... you probably dislike me, so I won't demand that you actually side with me. But whatever you do, my actions won't change. I will smash Kazu's goal. And to do that—"

I touch one of my piercings.

"I will part them for good."

".....U..uh..."

Yanagi, who would never normally think about siding with me, starts to waver.

I guess she's having emotional issues when thinking of cooperating with me or opposing Kazu's will. Yanagi has started considering it anyway, because she thinks that she might be able to make Kazu happy by disregarding those emotions.

".....Really?"

"What are you referring to?"

"Do you really have no intention of harming Kazuki-san?"

...And that's why she asks such a question.

She's essentially looking for a reason to cooperate with me. She wants me to give her a push.

"I won't harm him... I guess I can say that. However, I'll separate Otonashi from him, which means that he's going to suffer."

"I... see."

Most likely, she has already decided in her heart to betray him.

She'll suppress her emotions and obey me. Even if it means suffering pangs of remorse from betraying Kazu, she will believe that she's ultimately doing it for his sake.

What a beautiful love.

—Well.

Everything I told her was a lie, though.

I've been expecting you. That's the first lie.

I didn't expect Yanagi in particular, and I didn't consider that Kazu might send someone until after she actually arrived.

I only realized this because Yanagi's arrival felt suspicious. That Yanagi, out of all 998 of my [servants], was the first to arrive - it's too strange to be a coincidence.

It follows naturally that Kazu orchestrated her arrival.

Well, maybe my lie was more of a bluff, but it keeps Yanagi from getting any dangerous ideas and made her reconsider whose side she really wants to be on.

That Kazu won't oppose me anymore once Otonashi is gone is also a lie.

Kazu is opposed to the very existence of 'boxes'. He opposes me simply because I am an 'owner'. That's his nature.

Finally, it's also a lie that he will be happy once he's separated from Otonashi.

I do consider Otonashi to be a cancer growing inside Kazu, that's no lie. But it's impossible to remove something that has entrenched itself so deeply inside his body. Because they have spent a lifetime together, there is an unbreakable bond between them. Forcibly rooting out something that has insinuated itself into every part of his body is just as impossible as removing a cancer that has metastasized everywhere without killing the patient. That's also why I stopped trying to get Kazu and Kiri together.

Let's pretend Otonashi breaks up with Kazu: even if that happens, he'll still never forget about her. He might even obsess about her even more as the one who got away.

Tight bonds can also be curses. He can never be released from such strong bonds.

Therefore, I have no plans to bring Kazu and Yanagi together.

It's all a lie.

Yanagi will only earn his enmity by helping me.

But it's not so easy to see through my lies.

People tend to engage in wishful thinking. Yanagi is especially vulnerable. She wants to believe that she can make Kazu happy and also become his lover.

This is why she makes the choice that she does.

"What do you want me to do?"

Yuuri Yanagi chooses—betrayal.

"What can I do?"

She contorts her face in humiliation.

Stifling her feelings and resisting her remorse, Yuuri Yanagi offers to help me trick Kazuki Hoshino even though she hates me.

Without even realizing that this will only lead to his ruin.

—Hahaha, aren't you a poor, gullible thing. Once it's all over, I'll give you a lollipop!

Hiding my amusement, I say:

"Before long, Otonashi will come here. Once she gets here, you just have to use your glib tongue as always and control the conversation. That's how you can help me."

"...How will you get her here?"

"Soon, *she* will send Otonashi here."

"She?"

I utter the name of the only other person who can use my power:

"Iroha Shindou."

I received a call from Iroha-san.

"I really don't want to say this because it's embarrassing to sound like your stereotypical villain, but heck, it'll be easier to understand it this way. Err... I kidnapped Maria Otonashi, so do what I tell you to if you want her back."

"...Why?" I mutter to myself as I head toward the elevated railway that she specified, all alone per her demands.

Why would Iroha-san kidnap Maria...?

I immediately called Maria, just in case she was bluffing.

—But Maria didn't answer.

Yeah, I know: that's not proof positive that she was kidnapped. Perhaps Maria simply missed an incoming call.

But since I'm unable to get in touch with Maria, I have to assume the worst and go alone to the railway underpass as instructed - even if it's a trap.

"Why?" ...because I will always choose to try to save Maria.

And of course, Iroha-san made her demands with that in mind.

".....Tch!"

Such a pain!

I already know that she's a [servant] because of the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment', but it's just so hard to imagine Iroha-san obeying Daiya.

Besides, how is she even able to kidnap Maria?

I mean, Yuuri-san said that actions that go against people's moral values have to be specifically [ordered].

With his limited knowledge of the situation outside of the cinema, Daiya is unlikely to give a detailed [order] like "kidnap Maria and lure Kazu under an elevated railway by threatening him." Even if he did give such an [order], Iroha-san would be a really bad choice to execute it because she's strong-willed and brilliant. One of his fanatics would have been a much better choice - a fanatic would execute Daiya's [order] mechanically and without scruples. In Iroha-san's case, he'd run the risk of her finding a flaw in his [order] and doing something unexpected to thwart his plans.

Thus, my conclusion is that Iroha-san has decided on her own to kidnap Maria.

While running, I throw back my sleeve and look at the time. 20:27. The third movie, "Repeat, Reset, Reset," is about to begin. There are three hours and thirty-three minutes until the day is over.

The day I previously described as so short, has started to feel endless.



I reach the place I was directed to.

It's a tunnel under an overhead railway that runs along a river, distant from the city center. The graffiti on the walls demonstrate that this is a thug hang-out. The nearest street lamps are too far away to provide any real illumination. The only thing casting a faint light on the right half of Iroha-san's face is a weak lantern that she prepared herself.

I approach her, stomping through the overgrown grass. I can't see anyone else in the murky darkness, but I sense the presence of several other people. They probably aren't really trying to hide from me. If anything, they want their ill-hidden presence to make me nervous.

Iroha-san is sitting next to some graffiti on the wall.

"Woof, woof! Uuuh...!"

On a naked man who's on all fours.

"I know, I know, little boy. Kazuki-kun arrived, right?"

The plump man-chair is barking like a dog.

"...Ugh."

I feel ineffable disgust. The fact that his body is sagging everywhere irritates me even further.

Even though I don't want to look at him, I don't want to avert my gaze either. The mere thought of *him* making *me* move my gaze is hard to bear. *You* disappear from *my* sight! I don't want to have anything to do with such a sick pervert!

—Something suddenly clicks in my head and I calm down.

"This phenomenon..."

Right, I've seen it before.

I didn't think it was that bad in reality, but I've heard about it on TV.

"The 'Dog Humans,'" I murmur—and come to a realization. "So the 'Dog Humans' also appeared because of Daiya..."

"Right! Oh, but I created this one, not Oomine-kun."

"What do you mean? ...Anyway, how are you able to do that, Iroha-san?"

"Aah, do I have to start explaining from scratch? Well, listen, Kazuki-kun: I can now use the same powers as Oomine-kun!"

"Eh? How would you—"

...Hold on, Yuuri-san told me that the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' is shared. Does that mean that Daiya isn't the only person who can use those powers?

So all the others can as well...?

"For your information, I'm the only one with the same powers as Oomine-kun right now, so don't worry about that."

I feel slightly relieved after she says that.

...No, I'm not supposed to feel relieved right now. I have to confirm if Maria's safe.

I look around while trying to keep my eyes off the naked man.

"Where's Maria...?"

"Not here," she answers bluntly.

"Did you really kidnap..."

"I did. Thanks to the previous [order], I was able to find out where she lives, after all."

"What do you plan on doing to her? What do you want me to do?"

Iroha-san stares closely at me. Without answering, she gets off the "Dog Human."

And kicks his head.

While making half-assed howls, the naked "Dog Human" looks up at Iroha-san with puppy-dog eyes.

I frown at the repulsive spectacle that's unfolding before me.

...No, that's wrong. I forgot for a moment because of my disgust, but that's not the reaction that I'm supposed to display.

"W-What are you doing?! That man has merely been [ordered] to act like a dog! He's as human as you and I!"

"A human? Not quite. Appearances aren't deceiving in his case - he's an inferior being. Disgusting, isn't he?"

"Well, certainly... but only because you made him act like that!"

"You think so? But this guy likes to rape little girls!"

"What?"

What did she just say?

"He's a pedophile beyond help and was human trash even before becoming a dog! The power of the 'box' is primarily control of others, but it also lets you get a glimpse of others' sins, you know? Because of that, it's possible to search out such scum."

"...Did you search specifically for such a criminal?"

"I wanted to try making a 'Dog Human,' you see. I wanted a human who deserved such punishment. Well, that's when I came across this guy! It didn't have to be him, but I think he was a good choice. After all, I prevented him from producing even more victims. He's done it repeatedly, you know - raping little girls. And he's absolutely beyond help."

".....But... is that, true?"

"Yeah. He's a sick shit who only gets off if he pushes his miserable penis into the pussy of a crying little girl."

Iroha-san kicks at his head again.

The "Dog Human" raises a hideous cry.

I watch them silently.

"Look, you stopped saying anything."

"Eh?"

"You stopped telling me not to kick him."

Iroha-san commands the still bawling "Dog Human," "Down!" He gets down on all fours, thrusting his buttocks toward me.

"You admitted that he's inferior."

"I-I didn't..."

"Yes, you did."

She looks down at the "Dog Human," spits on him and then leans against the wall with a deadpan expression.

"Deep down, you wish that people like this would just die, don't you?"

"No!"

"Can you still say that after seeing his victims: girls who have become full-fledged cutters and refuse to leave their rooms, their parents who have divorced because they couldn't deal with their children's suffering anymore? After he's destroyed so many lives, how can you still say that this piece of shit deserves to live?"

"...I-I can..."

I want him to atone for his sins, and I don't think he can be forgiven, but the death penalty isn't right... I suppose. My conviction must be shaky because he's so hideous as a "Dog Human."

"Mmm? Well, I used to share your opinion, I guess. But surprisingly, that opinion might be in the minority! Humans like to think in terms of black and white, absolute good and absolute evil. Take any Hollywood blockbuster: don't you feel happy when the bad guy gets beaten up by the hero? Emotionally, we also tend to want people who have committed unforgivable crimes to get the death penalty. In other words: it's normal to want those fiends to disappear for good."

"...I don't think that way."

"But it's true! Although- I do see where you're coming from. I also used to think that it was wrong. I thought that the guys who simply go about shouting 'kill them,' 'they should die,' and so forth were just idiots. Even if someone commits a crime, that's just one side of that person, and he might also have his good sides or be a proper human otherwise, so I was convinced that you wouldn't press the 'execution' button if you really knew him. Besides, aren't plenty of the people who want to kill the sinners just hypocrites? How pure are they? There are plenty of guys who think drinking and driving is totally cool. Do they not give a shit about running people over? Yeah right they'd support their own executions! Well, that's how I used to think until I obtained these powers," she says and smiles faintly.

"...And now?"

"Yeah, now I think so! Those sinners should go to hell."

There is not the slightest hesitation in her voice.

"It's true that many people who think the death penalty is an easy answer are idiots. But even if you have an informed opinion after evaluating the sinners, the correct answer is still the death penalty. I know I'm being

Those people have assembled and started to surround us.

It's bizarre. It's terribly weird to see such a mismatched crowd of people, somehow act in perfect unison.

What's about to happen? How should I respond?

I have no clue what Iroha-san will do next, so I don't know how to react properly. I'm at a total loss.

Ignoring me, Iroha-san raises her voice.

"Let us punish him!"

"Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!"
"Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!"
"Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!"
"Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!"
"Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!"
"Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!" "Punishment!"
"Punishment!"

I'm overwhelmed by their sudden screams.

Almost twenty men and women are yelling while pumping their fists in the air.

...W-What is this?

I know they're just following Iroha-san's [orders], but I can't stay calm when they're right in front of me. I get the same feeling as when I saw the video of people prostrating themselves in front of Daiya. When twenty-odd people do the same abnormal thing in perfect synchrony, it's instinctively disturbing on some deep level.

The members of the paper-bag crowd continue to scream as they pull the "Dog Human" to his feet. They grasp him tightly from behind and turn the naked man toward Iroha-san.

Meanwhile, she's pulled out a knife.

"I-Iroha-san, what are you...?"

But she doesn't even look at me.

"Here's an [order] for you, rapist. Stop acting like a dog."

The "Dog Human" immediately undergoes a sudden change. His face instantly transforms into that of a frightened man. He seems to have been fully aware while he was a "Dog Human," as he's completely unsurprised - but plenty scared.

"A-Aah! Please stop! I-I'm guilty! I won't ever assault another girl!"

"Hah? Aren't you a bit late? You can't undo what you've done, can you? Their hymens can't grow back, can they? Ah, right. Come on, cut your cock off with this knife then."

"I-I—"

"How else are you going to make your amends, then?"

"I-I will never lay hands on a girl again! I promise!"

"Ha! When will you finally stop with your bullshit? What you're suggesting is the ethical lowest common denominator, and not something you do to atone, okay? That's like going to a restaurant and saying 'from now on I won't leave without paying my bill anymore.' Okay? Okey-dokey? Paying from now on as an apology? Who are you fucking with? If you really regret what you have done, then propose something that will aid those girls at least a little bit, you sack of shit!"

"A-Aid? W-What do you want me to do?"

"Try using your head. If you empathize with them at all, you should figure something out yourself. For example, you could pay them a hundred million yen?^[1]"

"O-One hundred million? T-That's impossible! I don't even have a job—"

Upon hearing that excuse, Iroha-san thrusts her fist into his face without batting an eye. One time, two times, three times. She punches him expressionlessly.

—Ah.

No matter what that man says, he's not going to be forgiven.

"Ah, ugh, gha! Ugh!"

Blood spills from his nose.

The paper-bag crowd holds him tight without saying a word. No one cares for his wounds. Iroha-san continues as if nothing had happened.

"You're only begging for your life right now because you're scared, not because you're at all repentant. I can predict that you'll continue your vile acts if I let you go. So, I'll end it now!"

Iroha-san claps her hands again.

"Here's an [order]. Tell me, what do you honestly think is an appropriate punishment for him?"

The paper-bag crowd replies.

"Die."

"Die."

"Die."

"Die," "Die you hideous mutt," "Die you criminal," "Die a painful death," "Die you limp dick," "Die you stinker," "Die you pervert," "Die, you deserve it," "Die already," "Die right now."

"Die."

"Die."

"Die."

They're responding because of an [order].

But I can hear the honesty in their voices.

Around twenty people are sincerely wishing for his death.

"Hah...," she lets out an exaggerated sigh. "It's been decided unanimously that you should die."

She brings the knife closer to him.

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop it! I haven't done anything to *you* guys, have I?! This is none of your business! Who are you to—GAAAAAAAAAH!"

Iroha-san tears off a handful of his hair without flinching. A ripping sound echoes off the walls.

One of the paper-bag people whispers, "die," and claps his hands together encouragingly. Someone else follows suit and also claps while whispering, "die." Bit by bit, it spreads and results in a chorus of "dies." They start clapping in a hateful rhythm for his death. "Die," clap. "Die," clap. "Die," clap. "Die," clap. "Die," clap. Die-die-die-die-die-die-die-die-die-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap.

A cheerful rhythm of "dies" resounds back and forth.

Watching them, I can't help but think:

—Ah, right. He deserves to die.

Unable to whine anymore, the man is now trembling in fear and pissing himself.

"Cry some more, you swine. Regret getting born, you swine. Suffer, you swine."

Iroha-san brings her knife right up to his eyeballs.

"Your death will be the ultimate form of catharsis for your victims."

Seeing her on the verge of making a grave mistake, I finally come to my senses.

"Iroha-san, sto—"

However, three men hold me back and keep me from acting. My field of vision gets cut off by someone's arm. I can't see anything.

"Iroha-san! You mustn't do that!"

If you do that, you won't be able to return.

You will be trapped by the 'boxes' and unable to return to your everyday life.

But—

"Here's an [order]. When my knife touches you, return to being a dog."

"UGYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHN!!!"

I couldn't stop her.

What echoes through the tunnel is not a man's scream, but a dog's howl.

The men release me and move away.

The first thing I see is a naked man covered in blood. Even though it's a horrible spectacle, I also feel a sick sense of satisfaction deep down. His scream is terribly pathetic, and the mere thought that it touched my eardrums disgusts me. I can't help but feel some degree of twisted pleasure as I watch his saggy body twitch.

I'm different from those "Dog Humans." I'm not that ugly or foolish. They get their just deserts^[2] because they're "Dog Humans."

Some kind of relief. Some sense of superiority.

But I understand all too well why Daiya created the "Dog Human" phenomenon.

It'll be terrible if that contempt for "Dog Humans" becomes commonplace. They will no longer be considered human, and will just be scoffed at and viewed as deserving of punishment. People will take their deaths for granted. Once that perception infiltrates the entire globe, our world will be covered by his 'box' and become "distorted."

I can't permit that.

Thus, to avoid giving in, I try to approach and help the still-twitching man.

"Don't move!"

But Iroha-san stops me.

"I won't let you help him. If you move, I can't guarantee Maria Otonashi's safety."

"What?!"

You dare use Maria as a bargaining chip?!

"W-Why would you do that? Why do you want to kill him so badly? Is there really a point in doing so?!"

"Certainly, there is no real point in killing this particular guy."

"Then why?!"

"But we'll be doing it repeatedly from now on. We will build a new world this way."

Right.

That's their aim, after all. That's the world Daiya and Iroha-san wish for. What I have just seen—people demanding the death of a criminal fool and then actually killing him— is, in miniature, what the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' will bring about.

"That's why I mustn't let you interfere now. If you did, you would continue to stand in our way. You would become an obstacle. Believe it or not, I know that you can become a surprisingly large obstacle. Therefore, I can't let you oppose us here!"

The paper-bag crowd is still silently surrounding and watching us.

From their midst, Iroha-san walks toward me with firm steps.

"Right. I guess it's time to come to the point and tell you what I want from you in return for Otonashi-san."

As Iroha-san approaches me, the lantern begins to illuminate her face in a demonic fashion.

She grabs my chin and pulls it toward her.

"Cease all resistance right now."

Her dimly lit face is painted in red.

A red line is dripping down her cheeks as if she were shedding bloody tears. The pupils of her eyes that have dilated because of the darkness are fixed upon me and holding me captive.

"To prove it, grit your teeth and watch how he dies. Do it like a little crying child whose mommy won't buy him any candy," she says and lets go of my chin. She tries to wipe away the red liquid on her lips with her arm, but she only ends up spreading it everywhere.

Ah... I understand now.

—Iroha-san can't return anymore.

She can't return to her "everyday life"—to a life without 'boxes'. Her eyes are as sharp as a raptor's, and cut into me like knives. Her face has become dull with madness.

Iroha-san's mind is somewhere else now. If I help that man, she might really hurt Maria. That's how far away she is from reality.

What is she planning on doing to me? Given her current state, she has no reason to let me go. If she's really sided with Daiya, she might use the [servants] around here to seize me and make me abandon the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema'.

—I won't let her do that.

But how should I deal with Maria's abduction?

I have no answer, and there *is* no simple answer. I'm left with no choice but to wait for her next move.

Iroha-san sees that I've come to a standstill, and takes out her cell phone in a manner so calm as to seem affected. Before doing anything, she explains, "You know, there's no need to put an [order] into words. So essentially, saying this aloud now is just a performance that I'm putting on for you."

She makes a call - I can barely hear a man's voice coming from the speaker of her phone, but I can't understand what he's saying.

Iroha-san answers him:

"Yeah, rape Maria Otonashi."

"Wha——?!" I exclaim.

What? What is she talking about?

With a triumphant smile, Iroha-san says:

"Didn't I tell you to prove that you won't oppose us? How could abandoning a worthless and inferior 'Dog Human' be sufficient proof? Well, that's why I'm doing this. If you still offer no resistance even after I deprive you of what you treasure most, I'll believe that you've thrown in the towel."

"Do you....."

I burn with anger.

"Do you think for a second that I'd stand for this?!"

"You won't? As you like, as you like. It just means that I'll corner you. I'll put you out of action by smashing your will to resist. And that's exactly why Otonashi-san will get raped."

"Iroha-san, do you even realize what you're saying? You are essentially doing the same thing as the pedophile rapist that you detest!"

"Not quite. I'm not doing it to satisfy my base desires. I have a clear goal. No war, regardless of its justness, can be won without killing the enemy's soldiers. It's unavoidable that villagers get involved and die. Some soldiers may even crack under the pressure and start massacring civilians. But on the whole, justice is justice. While there might be some minor failings, correct things are correct."

"Cut the crap! What you're doing can't be correct! Minor issues my ass! Stop spouting bullshit!"

"You seem to comprehend what I'm saying, no?" Iroha-san says with a wry smile.

It's useless... I can't persuade her with logic. Taking a single look into her muddy eyes, utterly void of sanity, is enough to make me understand that. Nevertheless, I have to stop her abuse of Maria no matter what.

Basically, Iroha-san just needs to believe that I have completely submitted to her.

...In that case, there's an obvious option.

"If you want to break my will to resist, there's no need to go that far!"

"Yes?" With an estimating look, Iroha-san urges me to continue.

It's a risky plan. I might really lose the power to oppose them, but at least I'll be able to keep Maria from being violated.

I propose my idea:

"Just make me your [servant]."

Right. Once that happens, hurting Maria will be meaningless. There is no better way to demonstrate my submission.

But Iroha-san's answer is unexpected:

"Impossible. I already tried."

"...Eh?"

"What do you think this lantern is for? 'Course, to make a shadow! ...Ah, perhaps you don't even know how the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' works? I guess that doesn't mean much to you, then. Well, listen up: if you step on my shadow, or I step on yours, I can [control] you. So I tried that already. But have you become a [servant], Kazuki-kun? Nothing has changed, right?"

"...you can't make me into a [servant]?"

"I can't say for sure, but at the very least, I couldn't a few moments before."

"Why not...?"

"Because you're an 'owner'! The 'boxes' impede each other. Like when Oomine-kun could still move freely despite getting sucked into the 'Game of Idleness'. I made sure that I stepped on your shadow the moment you came here, but I couldn't take control of you. By the way, the same holds true for Otonashi-san."

"You also tried to make Maria into a [servant]?"

"Well, yeah. That'd be the easiest way to go, right?" she bluntly explains.

"So it's impossible to make 'owners' into [servants]..."

"Mmm.... that's not totally accurate. According to Otonashi-san, it's possible if you give in. If you're game, can I give it another shot?"

In an utterly casual fashion, Iroha-san takes a step forward and—

—steps on my shadow.

Her movement was so smooth that I can barely believe that she's using her 'box'.

Because she acted so nonchalantly, she managed to step on my shadow before I even thought to evade her. Whatever Iroha-san says, there's no proof that I *won't* become a [servant] when she steps on my shadow. Perhaps her first attempt failed due to some unlikely confluence of events? Thus, I shouldn't freely let her step on my shadow.

"....."

I sense nothing unusual as I wait.

".....Can you make anyone into a [servant] except for an 'owner'?"

"Yeah. I'd really like to meet a guy who I can't subdue."

I still feel nothing.

Even though she has stepped on my shadow, I remain unaffected.

"If someone like that exists, he must be a freak."

Iroha-san is lying.

No... that's not quite right. She isn't lying - she's just wrong.

Iroha-san said that she can make anyone into a [servant] as long as he isn't an 'owner'. She's already made a mistake.

Because I am not an 'owner'.

Kazuki Hoshino is not the 'owner' of the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema'.

"Got it? That's why I have to reject your proposal of letting Otonashi-san go in return for becoming my [servant]."

"So that means...?"

"Yup. It's time to get back on schedule and break your heart."

As things stand right now, I can't stop her with my words anymore.

I've become painfully aware of that fact.

Suddenly, I notice something.

A blood-stained knife is lying near my feet.

I look at Iroha-san.

I know that Iroha-san is a wonderful person. She might be a bit clumsy when it comes to people's feelings, but at the same time, she's extremely considerate of others. Because she's aware of her own strength, she uses it to help other people - which explains her current actions as well. If I had the time for a proper discussion, Iroha-san would surely realize the error of her ways.

But there *is* no time.

I've realized that it's impossible to save Maria and Iroha-san in the limited time that remains.

So—

So———

""

Despite that, I'll still make a last ditch effort.

".....You are wrong, Iroha-san."

"Yeah?" she replies in a blatantly uninterested tone while picking her ears.

"You and Daiya are both wrong."

"Just for the record: about what?"

"Attempting to fix the world by killing people is wrong!"

"Just to be clear: I'm not interested in an opinion that pays lip service to some superficial sense of ethics, okay? Killing a murderer before he can kill a hundred people is definitely the right choice, no? In addition, his punishment can be used as a deterrent to scare all the other wannabe criminals and keep them from committing any new crimes. Until we obtained this 'box', we merely lacked the means to do so. Come on, enlighten me: how is any of this a bad thing?"

"...Indeed, I don't consider it a bad thing to isolate those criminal fools who only drag down others. There are people who don't deserve to live. I don't want to believe it, but I think that's a fact."

"Right? You're only denying it because you're bound by popular opinion. It caused you to superficially consider what we're doing a bad thing without any real thought."

"No. Because... how can you choose?"

"...Choose what?"

How can she still not understand?

Irritation and anger well up inside me.

I scowl at the foolish Iroha-san.

"Who deserves to die."

Iroha-san holds her breath, apparently having noticed my feelings.

"How do you and Daiya, who are neither divine nor perfect, determine who deserves to die? Are your choices infallible?"

"W-We—"

"Of course not. You decide to kill people with imperfect information."

"...Sure, I can't say that I have a 0% error rate. But how is that different from our current legal system? Not all death sentences handed down by judges are justified, either. ...Besides, the choices I make are difficult to screw up. For example, everyone should agree with me that, at the very least, this child molester deserves to die."

"Are you sure? It's true that he's hurt many people, but perhaps he has the potential to save even more people. Then he wouldn't deserve to die by your own logic."

"Hah? There's no way that this mutt has such potential!"

"I guess you're probably right, but how can you be absolutely certain?"

"...I can be. With a single glance, I know how dumb he is. He can't possibly save more people than he's hurt."

"But that's presumptuous of you! Even though you're no more special than anyone else, you've started to feel special because you obtained the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment'. Even though you simply obtained a 'box', you have gotten intoxicated by that feeling of power, and believe that you will always render a just verdict. Do you know what your current state is?"

I continue.

"It's called 'being full of yourself.'"

"....."

"It's so easy to predict what will happen! In the beginning, you will select sinners for elimination who everyone, more or less, can agree on. But that's only in the beginning. You're so full of yourself that you'll inevitably get carried away in no time. Bit by bit, you'll start to select people who fall in a gray area. You'll degenerate further and further, and in the end, you will turn people who merely stick in your craw into 'Dog Humans.' Good and evil will no longer matter, and you will simply erase people whenever they bother you. Maybe it's too late already? After all, you're about to crush me and Maria just because we're in your way."

My irritation has grown as I speak.

Why do Iroha-san and Daiya not understand such a simple point, even though they're supposed to be so smart? Are they somehow unable to imagine the outcome that I've depicted?

"What you are doing is neither judgment nor a righteous purge. It's murder. Both you and Daiya have become obsessed with the feeling of power that the 'box' gives you, and been driven to committing sins. What you two are about to engage in is no different from the slaughters that pervade human

history! You're not creating a revolution - you're just making another horrible mistake without justification!"

I walk toward the silent Iroha-san.

"Therefore, I will stop you."

I also make sure to stand right beside the knife.

"....."

Iroha-san seems to be slightly confused by my words.

What I'm saying is definitely true, and she should also realize that.

Yet, she responds anyway:

".....What's with that face?"

"...Face?"

"Yeah, your face! Even though you're trying to corner me with your words and fighting against me," she continues bitterly, "why are you smiling so gently?"

In response, I automatically reach up to my face.

"Normally, you wouldn't be able to smile like that. First off, a normal person wouldn't be able to say what you just said."

"...I haven't said anything strange or outrageous!"

"Well, you haven't. But a normal person wouldn't be able to make such objective statements in a situation like this. If the girl you love has been taken captive and you've lost your composure, you wouldn't normally be able to string together such a complex logical argument."

"Are you saying that I'm supposed to be more emotional?"

"I'm not talking about being emotional or reasonable. Your actions are on a whole different level. You can't do that normally. You just...can't..."

A mixture of confusion and fright appear on her face.

"From where—"

With that expression, she asks:

"From where do you behold the world?"

I have no idea what she means.

But Daiya once said something similarly cryptic to me. He told me that I was floating, or something like that. Her question probably means something similar.

Aah... I guess I'm not quite normal. I keep denying it, but I guess it's time to give in.

It sounds even more confusing when I try to put it into words, but if I were to describe myself honestly:

There's too little "self" inside me.

"...Enough, Kazuki-kun. It doesn't matter now. I won't stop."

"Didn't you agree with me?"

"You might have a point. I guess we are a little full of ourselves, and we aren't perfect and will make some mistakes. But that's no reason to stop acting. We mustn't give up because of that. We mustn't lose to reality and accept the evils of humanity as inevitable. We mustn't stay defenseless. I won't do that. But thanks for your criticism, I will take it into account and give it some thought before I kill someone!"

"Giving it some thought won't render your selection righteous!"

"Say whatever you want, but I don't consider this method of action intrinsically wrong."

After saying so—she continued speaking with eyes dulled with madness.

"Thus, I won't stop. And I won't change my mind about Otonashi-san."

Huh. So that's it, after all.

A faint sigh escapes my lips.

"What's that sigh supposed to mean? Did you finally give up? Did I break your spirit?"

"Yeah, I give up!"

On finding a way to avoid killing you.

Alright then. I mustn't let her notice my intentions. If I don't do it in an instant, I'll get taken down by the [servants] who surround us. I have to stab her without hesitation. I mustn't let her sense my murderous impulse.

Kill.

I have to stab her in the heart and murder her instantly, but do so as casually as if I were humming a familiar tune.

"...People who deserve to die, huh?"

Iroha-san thinks that such humans exist.

At the end of the day, we're also human - so that's not something we can decide for ourselves. Even I can think of some people who I believe should be killed, but that's wrong. It *must* be wrong.

If that's not the case, then what I'm about to do right now will be forgivable. I don't want that. I won't forgive myself for this act.

I'm merely making the same mistake as they are.

People who I think deserve to die.

From my perspective—

—everyone who hurts Maria deserves to die.

Thus, I thrust the knife into Iroha-san's heart.

I didn't make any superfluous movements.

I waited for her gaze to drift off slightly, scooped up the knife and stabbed her as I stood up. The blade disappeared into her body.

Die.

There was no such thought in my mind.

I didn't possess even a mite of murderous will. I merely did what had to be done. That's all.

Ah, could it be that...

Could it be that part of my personality would seem abnormal to others?

If so, I must absolutely keep Maria from seeing it. Right, if she did, we would—

"What... are you doing, Kazuki?"

My heart skips a beat.

"Ah, aaah...!"

Why?

Why is she...?

That way of calling me. That intonation. The ring of her voice.

The voice that I love so much belongs to—

".....Why... are you... doing that, Kazuki?"

A girl with a paper bag over her head approaches me.

"Er, ah...!"

...Why didn't I notice? Why didn't I notice her even though I should be able to discern her presence, even without seeing her face? Simple. It's dark, and I didn't get around to examining each member of the paper-bag brigade. Why didn't I think more about Iroha-san's choice to summon me to such a dark location?

Why didn't I notice what Iroha-san wanted to hide most?

The slender girl takes the bag off her face.

"Maria."

It's Maria.

Without a doubt, it's Maria.

"Kazuki...," she calls my name with a trembling voice.

"Why are you...?"

"Because I told her to."

Iroha-san answers my whispered question, providing an answer that I was already vaguely aware of. Even though the knife in my hand is still piercing her chest...

...Yeah, of course I realized it. I realized at the moment that I stabbed her, that there was virtually no feeling of cutting into something.

Iroha-san pulls out the knife that's supposed to be jammed into her heart, and pushes its tip against the palm of my hand. I feel no prick at all. The blade just slides back into the hilt.

There's no way I could kill someone with that knife—no, that novelty item.

"Do you want an objective opinion of your behavior over the past few minutes, Kazuki-kun?"

While I'm still taken aback, Iroha-san spits out:

"It's called 'being full of yourself.'"

She snatches the fake knife out of my powerless hands.

"Here's an [order], dog. Bark lively."

The naked man who has supposedly fainted in agony sits up at once. He gets on all fours and runs around us, barking in a lively fashion without caring at all that he's been painted blood red.

"Didn't I tell you that there's no need to put an [order] into words?"

Iroha-san stabs the "Dog Human" who's running about. Even though it can't possibly hurt, he screams painfully,

"GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHN," and collapses again.

"We poured artificial blood on him while you weren't watching. And then I [ordered] this 'Dog Human' to scream and act injured when I stabbed him. You swallowed it like an idiot."

Aah, come to think of it, I never saw her actually stab him because the paper-bag crowd was in my way. I only heard him scream and saw him writhing with agony, covered in crimson. Since it's so dark, fake blood is hard to distinguish from real blood, and it's easy for her to conceal a blood pack.

"...Why, just why did you..."

"Because well, I was [ordered] to by Oomine-kun. He gave me a single [order]: 'expose Kazuki Hoshino's betrayal to Maria Otonashi.'"

Iroha-san shifts her gaze to Maria.

"It was harder than I thought! I mean, she trusted you so blindly. It was obvious that she wouldn't readily believe that you betrayed her."

Maria bites her lip.

"But bringing Otonashi-san here was really easy. I used the same method on both of you, Kazuki-kun: I threatened her. Saying 'if you don't obey me or try to trick me, my [servants] will kill Kazuki-kun' was more than enough to get Otonashi-san to follow me, even though it sounded plenty fishy.

Naturally, a demand as harmless as 'watch us silently' was easy enough for her to tolerate. And so I showed her," Iroha-san says while jabbing the fake knife into her chest, "how you tried to kill me."

Everything—

Everything she did and said was purely intended to show Maria that I was willing to kill? Placing the knife within my reach, infuriating me by saying that she would have Maria raped, and inspiring me to come up with murderous plans by performing a fake murder before my eyes...

And in the end, I stabbed her with the fake knife just as she had intended.

Iroha-san snaps her fingers. In reaction, the paper-bag crowd strolls away in a leisurely, disorganized fashion - as if to tell me that they were done here.

"I was told to watch because you would supposedly try to kill Shindou," Maria says while completely avoiding my eyes. "I didn't believe her. Even when she told me that Oomine has already started to use his 'box' and I realized she was telling the truth, I could not believe that you would kill anyone. Solving a conflict by killing someone—that's unacceptable. Once you resort to murder, your degradation is complete and your beliefs lose all meaning. You should know my feelings on the subject. You should also know that I can't collaborate with someone like that. And yet, you....."

At a loss for words, she just shakes her head.

"...No, let's not make this about me. But I still don't get it, Kazuki. To begin with, you're not a killer. Even if it's only attempted murder, the fact that you tried to kill someone would create constant pangs of remorse. Burdened with such a heavy sin, you couldn't possibly return to your 'everyday life,' and on top of that, that 'everyday life' would be distorted because *you* would be a changed man. Ah, but the problems extend beyond the psychological, since the law would deprive you of your 'everyday life' if you committed murder, wouldn't it? Therefore, you... a person who values his 'everyday life' above everything else would never choose to kill."

She clenches her fist.

"There's no way you could commit murder.....there's just no way! There's no way Kazuki would do that!"

Maria gives me a pleading look.

"...Yes, that's right! You can't! You would never do that! You must have been controlled. Most likely, you were controlled by that 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' and coerced into acting that way. Right? Kazuki, tell me! Am I right?" she says while shaking my shoulders.

"Please deny that you were responsible for doing it."

Maria is begging with every part of her being. Even though she has seen my malicious deed with her very own eyes, she still wants me to deny it. Even though she knows all too well that I'm at fault, she still asks for the impossible.

I can't believe that Maria is acting like this. I can't believe it, but...

I'll take advantage of her feelings, then.

I'll continue to deceive her.

"You're right!"

I'm awful. My own words make me want to puke.

But if I admit the truth, Maria will break up with me and never return.

Therefore, I have to resort to desperate lies, no matter how dirty they are.

"So after all," she whispers. "After all, that's how it is."

She looks relieved.

Maria has believed in my blatant lie. She has let herself be deceived.

Yeah... right. Maria doesn't want to break up with me, either. She still wants to trust me. Our bonds can't be severed that easily.

So I shall lie to the very end.

"Maria, listen—"

"Fufu, I'm relieved! With that—"

With a truly relieved expression, Maria continues:

"I no longer have to... believe in anyone."

".....Huh?"

Her expression.

And her words.

Don't match.

"I vaguely... no, truth be told, I had noticed long ago! So after all—"

After all—

After repeating what she started saying a few moments ago, she continues like this:

"So after all—you were betraying me."

"Ah....."

All my energy drains away and my arms fall limply to my sides.

I look hesitantly at Maria.

"Oh, I can tell. Hey, I used to be able to read your mind just by analyzing the movements of your facial muscles! I can't do that anymore, but haven't I spent an entire lifetime together with you? I can still see through something as simple as a lie. But I desperately tried to persuade myself by thinking

"there's no absolute proof." I avoided the problem until there was decisive evidence for your betrayal. But now I found it. Your pitifully inept lie made me realize that you have changed to a hopeless extent."

I was just thinking that our bonds can't be severed that easily.

...How stupid can I get?

I have been betraying her repeatedly. I have been deceiving her all along ever since the 'Game of Idleness'. I have been destroying our originally nearly unbreakable bonds bit by bit.

And now, thanks to my constant betrayals, these bonds have finally snapped.

"Aah, I'm so relieved! I knew that I couldn't carry on like that. I was blaming myself for engaging in self-deception, and suffering as a result. I am a 'box', so I mustn't have a human heart. I mustn't settle down with someone and become attached to him. That notwithstanding, I couldn't bear to part from you, Kazuki, and searched for reasons to stay with you, such as meeting 'O'. I even felt scared! I feared that I might lose my goal and disappear entirely!"

That was my goal - I wanted "Aya" to disappear so that "Maria" could live.

But...

"But... you betrayed me and taught me that I was wrong. You made me realize how weak I am. You made me make that decision."

Every single word she speaks pierces my heart.

Maria was the one I wanted to hurt least. She was the one I wanted to protect most.

And yet, she was the one I hurt most, the person that I wrecked.

"...Maria, listen. It was all for—"

I can't just let her leave.

However,

"Don't!"

Maria turns away from me.

"Eh?"

"Don't call me Maria."

I'm not even allowed that.

"I abandoned that name long ago. It only lingered because you decided to keep using it, even though I coined it on a whim. But our relationship is over

now, so there's no need to use that name anymore. My life as Maria has come to an end."

With these words, Maria turned back toward me and gazed directly into my eyes—

She said it.

"I am the 'box' called Aya Otonashi."

At that moment.

A certain image pops into my mind and marks the start of a flashback.

It's a pale, stale, dull, warped image.

It's the ever-repeating classroom.

A Maria in sepia is standing on the teacher's platform. She introduces herself. I can't make out her expression. There are hundreds and thousands of patterns, so I can't determine which is the one true pattern. "I am Aya Otonashi. Pleased to meet you," "I'm Aya Otonashi...Regards," "Aya Otonashi," "Aya Otonashi," she used to say within the repeating world. And as time went by, her emotions disappeared from her face. She used that virtually infinite time to create a separate personality. She repelled everyone in order to become a perfect 'box'.

The girl who stands there.

The expression of the girl who stands there.

".....Ah....."

I finally notice. I never noticed it before because I was always with her.

Maria has recently started to express her feelings like a normal person. She has started to grieve, get angry, and laugh like a normal person.

I didn't notice. Even though I might have found another path if I'd noticed earlier, I failed to notice.

Maria has lost her normal feelings once again.

A whispered "No..." escapes my lips. "I will forever call you Maria!"

"....."

Ignoring my words, she holds out her hand to Iroha-san. Iroha-san instantly understands Maria's intentions, and hands her the fake knife.

"Kazuki. You have changed. The instant you stabbed Shindou's chest with that toy, you changed once and for all. You're not my partner anymore, but a being that exists to corrupt me. Therefore—"

Maria makes me hold the knife for some reason.

"—You are now my enemy."

I don't know why, but Maria embraces me gently with a soft smile.

"...Maria?"

Maybe she doesn't want to leave me after all? Even though that's absurd, I can't help but grasp at such feeble thoughts.

But as expected, the truth is entirely different.

I see it.

I see the knife that I am holding plunge into her chest.

"Ah..."

Of course it's just a toy. It's not really hurting Maria. But it just happened to be a toy today.

"That's how it is," she whispers. "When I'm near you, you pierce my heart like this."

She speaks in a terribly gentle tone, which only gives her words an even greater impact.

She's right.

That's exactly what I was trying to do. That's what happens when we meet each other as enemies: I stab Maria in the heart.

"Kazuki."

Maria's body is as slender and fragile as always.

She continues while the knife in my hands is still held to her chest:

"Thank you for everything."

This delicate young girl will continue to fight alone. She will continue to fight even when she is betrayed and stabbed. She will continue to fight for complete strangers, abandoning her own happiness.

I can see how that will end.

In defeat.

In the not too distant future... no, in the near future, Maria will collapse under that burden. Honing her soul like a blade, she will disappear once she's been filed away to nothing.

Even though I can envision her fate, I can't stop her.

Maria breaks the embrace.

At last, she is released from the knife.

She snatches it out of my hand and returns it to Iroha-san, who's been watching us with a profound lack of interest.

Not even deigning to look at me, Maria turns away and walks off.

"Kazuki," she whispers, "I couldn't finish off the hamburgers on my own."

Fool that I am, I didn't notice right away, but—

Those were Maria's parting words.

◆◆◆ Daiya Oomine - 09/11 FRI 20:57 ◆◆◆

"Because you resemble me," explains Maria Otonashi onscreen.

In response, I mutter, "What the...?"

Yanagi and I have been teleported for the n-th time and are watching the third movie. Yanagi sits behind me on my right, and next to me is Maria Otonashi's shell. Otonashi seems to be the lead character in the current movie, "Repeat, Reset, Reset."

I'm confused. Why Otonashi? We don't share any special memories. I haven't gotten close to her the way I am with Rino and Haruaki. If this is really a screening of my sins, did I do something to Otonashi without realizing it? Doesn't Otonashi as the main character lack impact if the goal is to make me suffer?

That's what I thought at first.

But my predictions were totally wrong.

What I'm seeing is totally unexpected.

It's a scene from the 'Rejecting Classroom' that I have no memories of. Otonashi and I are trying to find a way to escape.

"I cooperated with Otonashi...? Even before Kazu did?"

It's an utterly strange sight. On top of that, my interactions with Otonashi aren't hostile (as they are now) or perfunctory (as they usually were).

Instead, I'm expressing familiarity.

"What's with that stupid look on my face?"

...No, I guess it's no wonder.

I look at Otonashi's face onscreen.

She has draped herself in transcendentalism. But that's not because she has actually attained transcendence; it's merely because she has retained all her accumulated memories of that world's iterations, which inevitably makes her appear that way to the rest of us.

Other people might not be able to tell the difference, but I can.

I can tell that that personality is self-constructed.

What remains is a girl who, just like me, stifles herself in order to try to achieve something. I must have felt a sense of familiarity as a result.

"You've gotta help me!"

Because of that, I suppose, I said those foolish words to her on the 1536th iteration of March 2nd.

...Whoa, hang on! Are you trying to kill me with embarrassment? Has the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema' changed its approach and is now going for humiliation?

How can I even remember what happened in the 'Rejecting Classroom'?... I momentarily wonder, but correct myself right away: I haven't retained my memories. Unlike Kazu, I can't pull off such a feat. However, much like what happened in the 'Game of Idleness', where my NPC was able to see through my plans, I was able to grasp what had happened in the previous iterations quite precisely with the assistance of Otonashi's explanation.

In that sense, I may have met her minimal requirements for becoming a partner.

"I'm at a loss. What can I do for Kiri? Nothing! If I touch her, she grows pale. If I embrace her, she recalls her past and cries. Whatever I do, I can only hurt her. But she needs me. She can't make it alone. If I leave her alone, she's bound to make a grave mistake. If approaching her and leaving her alone are both wrong, tell me, what am I supposed to do?"

What the hell am I blurting out... Telling Otonashi these things won't amount to anything. She's just as powerless as I am.

However, my self from a different time continues speaking.

"I think that you might be able to help me out here," I say desperately onscreen. "You might be able to find a solution for Kiri somewhere in these endless repetitions."

Such a solution doesn't exist!

My onscreen self is so foolish that I'd roar my lungs out if my voice could reach him. I was unbelievably wimpy back then.

But Otonashi's answer was just as unbelievably irresponsible. Our problem has remained unsolved up to this day, so I know she never found a solution.

And still she said:

"Got it. I'll find it for you."

The next scene is set on the 1539th iteration of March 2nd—three "school transfers" later. She says to me:

"I've found the solution."

What is she talking about? There is no solution. ...There must be no solution.

"Rather, I've found the best thing you can do for Kirino, that is."

"The best thing... what would that be?"

As embarrassing as it is, my onscreen self couldn't hide his excitement.

I must have foolishly gotten my hopes up. I must have hoped that there was a solution that I couldn't think of on my own.

But Otonashi just said:

"Leave her alone."

It goes without saying that I was disappointed by that answer. I even got angry.

"Don't fuck with me! Who will save her then? Or do you want to say that Kiri's already okay!"

"...No, Kirino's wounds are deep. I'm afraid they will not heal."

"Why are you telling me to leave her alone then?!"

"Because she can't be saved by anyone."

"What did you say?!"

"That's how deep Kirino's wounds are. You wouldn't regrow a lost arm right? Wounds that deep aren't things that can be healed."

"Stop being such a smart-aleck! Have you given up on everything because you have spent so much useless time in this 'Rejecting Classroom'? If you lost an arm, you could still have it replaced with a prosthesis through an operation, right?"

"Maybe someone out there is capable of doing that for her. While it wouldn't completely fix her wounds, it would still be a great balm. But Oomine, you aren't capable of doing it."

"Why?! Who would be able to do it if not me!"

"You should have realized that," Otonashi twisted her face bitterly, *"you are keeping her wounds from healing."*

I remained silent onscreen.

"Because of you, Kirino wishes to return to her former self. She can't accept the artificial arm even though it might save her—because if she accepted a

prosthesis, she wouldn't be her former self anymore. Merely by staying by her side, you are preventing her from moving on."

Yeah, I know. Even that wimpy version of me should know that if he were honest with himself.

*"Haven't you realized that already? Yet, you... no, **because** of that, I suppose. Because you have realized it, you seek a way to help her. It's also true that leaving her alone is not a perfect solution—if you, the person who understands her best, were to desert her, new problems would likely arise. That being said, I have come to the conclusion that disengaging from her is the best choice. Thus, you can't do anything for Kirino other than breaking things off with her."*

"If I do that, she will suffer, and may make a mistake that leads to more suffering. She might get trapped in a vicious cycle. You're still telling me to break things off with her?"

"Yes."

"Are you messing with me?"

*"I'm not. If you leave, she **might** be pursued by sorrow, but if you stay, she **will** be pursued by sorrow. And that's not all. Should you not leave, then not only she will remain drenched in sorrow, your own wounds will even more rapidly become fatal."*

"It doesn't matter what happens to me!"

"Fool! Of course it does!" She caught me by surprise with an emotional outburst - so out of character compared to her normal frigidity. *"Do you—want to become like me?"*

That was her bitter silent scream.

By now, I know its meaning.

Right now, I am heading toward my own ruin with certainty. And I'm sure that the same applies to Otonashi. Come to think of it, it makes perfect sense: to date, her every action contains nothing but self-sacrifice. She lives for something other than herself.

She thinks that it's enough that a single person has chosen such an existence, and she's already that person.

However, there's no way I would accept something like that from a mysterious girl who just transferred in. We may have been partners on previous "March 2nds," but I did not have those memories.

Unlike Kazu, I gave her words no additional weight.

"If you have no intention of lending me a hand, I won't cooperate with you anymore."

"...Oomine."

Otonashi, however, had associated with me for more than 1,539 days worth of time. Judging from her personality, that was more than enough for her to develop some degree of attachment to me.

Thus, her desire to help me had grown strong.

"If you really insist on curing her wounds completely, there is only one solution, and I will accept it. I will achieve success for the sake of you and everyone else."

This is why she said to me:

"I will complete my 'box'."

But as we were naturally unable to accept that solution, we parted for good.

But even after what should technically have been our final separation, we continued to be partners.

The reason is simple: because Otonashi kept me in the dark about our decision to split up on the 1539th iteration of March 2nd. And of course, that was enough to counter our split, since my memory was reset each time. But while that may have held true on my end, Otonashi wasn't so cold-hearted as to pretend that the emotional pain she inflicted on me in that iteration never existed. She kept that incident in mind even though I'd never remember it.

There was no true mutual trust between us anymore.

And on the 1542nd iteration of March 2nd, we unexpectedly managed to reach Mogi.

But we hit our limit at that point. We couldn't make any additional progress. The 'Rejecting Classroom' was based on Mogi's 'wish' to spend a March 3rd without any regrets, and thus was designed to make anyone who discovered the 'owner' lose those memories. Upon the 1543rd iteration, even Otonashi had forgotten that Mogi was the culprit.

We reached Mogi a few more times after that, but not once did we get any further. Since Otonashi had completely renounced violence, she couldn't destroy Mogi's 'box', and my words didn't reach Mogi. Besides, I didn't possess the memories and frustration generated by that endless repetition, so I wasn't desperate enough to launch a no holds barred attack on Mogi. The problem wasn't grave enough from my perspective to justify hurting her, even though that was the only solution.

We had come to a dead end. And as it turned out later, Kazu was the only one able to deal with Mogi's 'box'.

Thus, my relationship with Otonashi ended.

"Farewell."

On the 1,635th March 2nd, after over a hundred iterations spent together as partners, Otonashi finally gave up on me.

I frowned, taken aback by her sudden words of farewell.

The first lesson had just ended, and Kazu sat next to me.

He was also puzzled, and asked: *"Daiya, did you already know her?"*

"No, not at all."

The reason for my surprise was of course *not* that she had suddenly ended our lengthy partnership, but because Otonashi was a mere stranger to me, given my memory reset within the 'Rejecting Classroom'. Words of farewell seemed completely out of place.

Surprisingly, Otonashi seemed hurt by my attitude. Even though she must have gotten used to being the cause of confusion for everyone after repeating the same day so many times, she couldn't just ignore it.

...Why?

I have no clue, but I can hypothesize: Otonashi was completely alone in that world, but by partnering up with me, she found someone to talk to about her experience of repeating the same day over and over. It was the first time since she had entered the 'Rejecting Classroom' that she had been released from solitude.

But she became alone again.

Forever alone in a world that might repeat forever.

If that's true... then it's as simple as this: she was lonely.

That means that she was still green after 1,635 "school transfers."

Without saying anything about the 'box', Otonashi continued:

"Once the 1,635th iteration ends, you will forget everything anyway. And most likely, you won't be able to make use of my advice. Thus, what I am about to say will only serve my self-satisfaction and nothing else. Still, let me just say:"

Ignoring my increasing confusion, she continued.

"Do not use a 'box'. Ever."

It's a warning that the current "me" can't remember hearing.

"You would try to grant an impossible 'wish' if you obtained a 'box'. You would pursue an ideal that you can't handle—just like me."

But what was she trying to achieve with those words?

It goes without saying that her warning in and of itself was pointless; I have forgotten it just as she predicted, and ended up using a 'box'. It's almost as if she had been talking to herself.

Oh, I see.

She *was* just talking to herself. Otonashi was merely putting her own story into words. Otonashi was just trying to take her mind off her woes by spitting out her frustration, which she had no one to share with, into the emptiness of that world.

At that point, Otonashi had weakened that much.

"I know what such a 'wish' leads to. It ends in,"

Thus, what she described was essentially her own ending.

"Ruin."

That was a sad confession.

A confession that was supposed to reach my heart.

"...Huh? What the fuck are you talking about?"

But I did not suddenly remember the time we had spent together and I did not respond to her with comforting words.

There was no miracle.

The two of us together couldn't perform a miracle.

Onscreen, I simply sneered at an unfamiliar girl who was spouting nonsense. In the end, I ignored her and left with Kazu.

Otonashi was left alone in the classroom.

She stood stock-still, surrounded by the curious whispers of our other classmates.

Clenching her teeth and fists, Otonashi continued to direct her speech toward the empty space where I had been.

"But what would I do if you learned about the 'boxes' and obtained one nevertheless? I would not take it from you. I'd oppose every other 'owner', but I might not oppose you."

Not oppose me?

What is she talking about? That's utter—

"———"

Hold on. As a matter of fact, Otonashi has not done anything to me since I returned to school armed with the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment'.

Hey, don't tell me...?

I suddenly consider a certain possibility.

I used to think that she didn't attack me because she was either deceived by Kazu, or deliberately played along with him despite seeing through his lies. But either way, I used to think that Kazu was the cause of her inaction.

But if she's telling the truth onscreen, is she also unsure of how to deal with my 'box'?

"Maybe I'd team up with you again—No, that's out of the question. I wouldn't cooperate with you. Nor would I want to interfere in any way. Our aims just happen to lie in the same direction. We were never supposed to become partners. Yes, in reality, we are—"

The phrase she said next was not particularly unpleasant. Yet she contorted her face and spoke bitterly anyway:

"Kindred spirits, I guess."

I see, it stands to reason that Otonashi would make such a face.

After all, it means that Otonashi and I are both doomed.

".....I feel so sorry for Kazuki-san."

A voice draws my attention away from the screen and back to reality.

With a discontented frown, Yuuri Yanagi has started to whisper while watching the movie.

She feels sorry for Kazu? What kind of reaction is that? Like she spotted Otonashi cheating on him.

...I guess I can understand her. By no means has Otonashi been unfaithful to him or anything, but Yanagi probably considers Otonashi and Kazu's relationship as something sacred. Therefore, Otonashi's partnership with me within the 'Rejecting Classroom', and the time I spent as Otonashi's only confidante, must already seem like betrayal to Yanagi.

...I'm hardly one to talk, though.

I, too, thought that the story of the 'Rejecting Classroom' was just about the formation of the bonds between Otonashi and Kazu. I thought there was no other meaning to it.

But that's not it at all. Come to think of it, that's only natural. Otonashi didn't spend a lifetime's worth of time with just Kazu. Indeed, he was the only one who could retain his memories and stay by her side, but she was in constant contact with the entirety of our class.

Of course, I was one of those people. Since I was unable to retain my memories, I naturally was unable to call her "Maria" when she introduced herself as "Aya Otonashi," and I could not become her full-fledged partner. But while I might have forgotten her, Otonashi still spent a long time in my company.

In the repeating world, there was also a story about me and Otonashi.

Pondering her words, I whisper: "Doomed, huh..."

There was no need for her to point that out to me, the uber-realist.

If I use a 'box', I will ruin myself.

Because I know my capabilities, I also know my limits. I inevitably realize that I will eventually fold, however hard I struggle, whatever moves I make.

That awareness of my limits also imposes a limit upon my 'box', which prevents me from mastering it.

Jeez... why am I here at the point of no return when I knew all this? Why am I entangling all sorts of unrelated people and ruining their lives for the sake of my ideals? Worst of all, I have even committed murder. I have reached a point where I can no longer just say "I quit."

Why did I use a 'box'?

When did I become the person I am today?

—Do you have a wish?

Right. I remember.

It was too late for me the moment I came across 'O' and learned about the 'boxes'.

Once I learned about them, I had to use one. Even though I knew that my 'wish' would never come true, I had to use one. If there was any chance for

my 'wish', which I had totally failed to attain, I had to reach out for it. I'd be willing to pay any price and grasp at any straw.

My actions were predetermined, and my ruin preordained.

If 'O' handed a 'box' to me with all that in mind— I clamped down on my thoughts.

...Enough already. Enough. Let's leave this subject.

The movie is still playing.

I decide to focus on it.

"Oomine. If you fail and put yourself in a hopeless situation, I will save you. I exist for the sake of doing that. If everything goes wrong—"

Alone in the classroom, the Otonashi onscreen continued.

"I will let you use my 'Flawed Bliss'."

"I have decided that I never said that."

Otonashi's voice resounds above me, but not in stereo and not from the speakers.

"After all, that conversation did not truly exist for you. And because it's meaningless if only I know about it, I decided that it never happened. Not only the conversations that I had with you, but many other things as well."

A shadow is being cast on the screen, projected by the person who is standing in the middle of the projector beam—as if to proclaim that she stands above the 'Wish-Crushing Cinema' and the movie that is playing.

"____"

I don't want to admit it, but I can't help but hold my breath. Even though she looks exactly the same as she always does, as I'm used to seeing her, I'm still awestruck.

Is such a reaction to seeing a mere human even possible? ...As a matter of fact, I *have* reacted like that just now. For a moment, I have forgotten how to breathe, and my eyes widened while my mouth fell slightly open for no apparent reason. The sight of her has jumbled the rhythm of my heart, caused me to break out in a cold sweat, and set my fingers atremble.

Just by standing there, she awes me. Just by facing me, she exerts so much pressure on me that her presence feels not only oppressive, but razor-sharp like a blade.

At that sight, a certain name escapes my lips as if yanked out of the depths of my guts.

"Aya Otonashi."

Only after whispering out loud, do I realize that I've used the correct name.

"To decide that it never happened, huh... Just why didn't I notice," she says, "that I should have made the same decision about my partnership with Kazuki?"

She has only called herself "Maria" up until now because someone who remembers that name has bound her to it.

But she cut him off.

She has become his enemy.

Released from that spell, no name is more appropriate for her than "Aya Otonashi." "Maria" doesn't suit her anymore.

She is no longer human, now that she has broken the absolute bonds she and Kazu once created for her goal. The moment she found herself able to do that, she stopped being human. I understand that better than anyone else, since I'm aiming for the same thing. Her perfect sense of idealism borders on monstrosity. She, who has completely suppressed her past self, is my very ideal personified - an entity that exists solely for the sake of a single goal.

—There no longer is a zeroth Maria anywhere on this planet.

No one, not even Kazu, can restore "Maria Otonashi" now. There is even less hope that she can stop than I can.

Her naked transcendence causes the scales to fall from my eyes. Even though that realization is nothing but proof that I cannot master my 'box', I can't keep myself from seeing through it any longer.

Seeing through—

'O'.

"So you lost to Oomine-kun again, Kazuki-kun."

After a long time, I begin to recover from my shock and my ears start registering sound once more.

I look around and notice that Iroha-san is looking up at me while sitting and resting her chin on her hands. She's the only other person who's still in this tunnel.

I take a look at my watch. I have been standing motionless for nearly half an hour. The third movie, "Repeat, Reset, Reset," is about to end.

"Hew...," she sighs like a mother waiting patiently for her boy to calm down. "Come on, give me your 'Wish-Crushing Cinema' and become my [servant]. I'll do you the favor of finishing you off."

I still have trouble focusing my thoughts. My vision sways back and forth, making even the graffiti on the walls seem like meaningful art. It hurts to swallow. The fact that my nostrils are in the center of my face irritates me for some reason. I discover dirt under my fingernails and feel strangely embarrassed.

I don't give a shit.

I don't give a shit about that 'Wish-Crushing Cinema' and those [servants].
Maria.

I have hurt Maria.

I couldn't stop Maria.

She isn't trying to return to being "Maria Otonashi" anymore. She has become "Aya Otonashi" once and for all.

Can I still turn the tables and restore Maria?

I think about it and come to a conclusion:

—It's impossible.

——Impossible.

I have no goal anymore.

"...Say, Iroha-san."

But for some reason, with a vacant look, I pose a question that has been bothering me for a while.

"What?"

"That was a performance to show Maria that I have betrayed her, right?"

Why am I asking this? Sure, this has been bothering me, but right now I have no inner reserves left to worry about that.

"I told you so, didn't I?"

"But still," I continue as if I might find a solution somehow, "you weren't lying when you said that you'll select people who deserve to die, right?"

Her eyes widen, and then the corners of her mouth turn up.

"Of course." Her eyes are dulled with madness. "I will do everything it takes to exterminate those scum!"

Absentmindedly, I think:

...As I thought.

I was right when I thought that Iroha-san can't return to her everyday life anymore.

The goal she spoke about at length before a "Dog Human" was no lie. My claim that she is making a mistake was appropriate after all.

Daiya and Iroha-san will persistently pursue the goals of their mistaken mindset. Even if they realize the error of their ways, they won't be able to turn back anymore, and will be forced to continue until they break. Like Maria will.

Someone has to stop them.

But it's too late for me. I've lost my goal and feel utterly apathetic.

I have given up.

""

Given up?

On what? On Maria? *I*?

Yes. Yes, I have. There is no solution, so I have no other choice.

But actually thinking about giving up causes my body to heat up like crazy, making it feel like it could melt at any moment. My arms and legs feel like they're about to get torn out of their joints. That choice is absolutely forbidden. I must absolutely avoid it.

Besides—

"—Don't fuck with me."

What is this feeling that has welled up within me?

Am I angry? At Iroha-san?

It would make sense. I was deceived by her. She tricked me into showing Maria that I have changed, and caused me to part ways with her. Besides, Iroha-san is trying to get innocent people involved in her mistake.

But that's not it.

This feeling is not directed toward her.

After all, I know that she's not a bad person. Her wish to destroy all of the criminal fools merely happens to be incompatible with my own views. On top of that, I feel that it's not even her fault that she has developed that opinion.

It is true that she honestly pursues her wish.

But it still doesn't make sense to me; has she always felt this way? Did she wish for this even before obtaining the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment'?

...Before she received those powers from Daiya?

"I have a question."

"What?"

I look at Iroha-san again. Her blood-stained face shows just a shadow of her former self. Those eyes that used to radiate an appealing strong will have dulled.

That's not an expression a normal person should make. Iroha-san has broken at some point.

When?

"Was it so agonizing that you couldn't withstand the pain?"

"Huh?"

"I'm talking about the moment when you received the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment'!"

Yes, it must have been then that she broke.

I suspect she was forced to undergo something when she accepted those powers. No, maybe not only then. Maybe she has to suffer constantly to be able to use her power, judging from what Daiya has had to bear.

".....Why would you ask that?"

That's a clear confirmation of my thoughts.

And now I've realized.

Why has she done that?

The answer:

It was just her suffering and struggle.

When she received the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment' she broke completely because she was already weakened due to the 'Game of Idleness'.

Overwhelmed by an assault of negative feelings, she subconsciously groped for a way to vent them. Because without doing so, her heart wouldn't be able to take it.

She found something to vent her frustration on right away.

It was Daiya's fool-hunt idea. Having become unable to believe in others, she leapt on that idea. She tried to turn away from her own wretchedness by eliminating those who she considered scum under the pretense of correcting the world.

Daiya coerced her into doing that.

Daiya sacrificed Iroha-san for his own 'wish'.

So is this feeling that blurs my vision directed at Daiya?

.....No.

Daiya is no different than Iroha-san. He has obtained a 'box' to try to pacify his internal torment. I consider him to be a victim as well.

I am angry at him for causing Maria to leave me and for turning Iroha-san into what she is now. But this stubborn feeling is something different.

...Anger?

No. It's similar, but it's not anger. It's nothing as mild as anger.

This unbearable emotion must be—hatred.

Against whom?

Ah.

If it's hatred, then there's only one target.

There is only one being that I would hate so much.

"——'O'."

"You called me?"

I'm not surprised by his arrival.

I expected it.

I look at 'O'.

"What kind of appearance is that?"

A girl so beautiful that she seems to stand above anything and everything has appeared. But because she is *too* beautiful, she seems unreal and fake, and makes a disagreeable impression on me.

But then why does the following thought cross my mind, when their faces don't even resemble each other's?

That long-haired girl... resembles Maria Otonashi.

"...Could you tell us who you are?" asks Iroha-san.

"Right, we have not had the pleasure. I assumed that you would figure out who I am on your own, but if that's not the case, I'll introduce myself. I am 'O'."

"'O'? You?" she says, and suddenly widens her eyes, as if she has just noticed something, and assumes a defensive posture. "Have you come to support Kazuki-kun or what...?"

"Hehe."

'O' neither negates nor affirms his intent.

"Oomine-kun warned me that you're on Kazuki-kun's side. Have you come to his rescue because he's in a pinch?"

"I have never helped him, but it is true that he has my favor."

"You intend to stand in my way, don't you?!"

'O' ignores her yell and averts her gaze.

"While I can't say this for sure," 'O' addresses me, paying no heed to Iroha-san's increasingly frenetic state.

"...H-Hey!"

"You have drawn my interest because I sensed that you are somewhat different from other humans."

".....tch!"

Iroha-san realizes that she has no role in this conversation and lapses into silence. Apparently, she has judged that there's no use in trying to make herself known to the entity before us.

"But I had no clear idea of why you, and only you, are special, and how we're related. However, by witnessing how you stabbed this girl just now, I was finally able to reach some sort of conviction. Therefore, I'd like to confirm it now."

I wrinkle my brow and scowl at 'O'.

"For that purpose... yes, I guess I'll provide you some insight into my being."

"...What are you talking about...? Do you think that would change anything? There's no way that it could."

"Oh, I wouldn't be too sure about that. You might feel much closer to me, who knows?"

"Closer? Don't make me laugh."

"You don't normally encounter a being that grants 'wishes' in the form of such a familiar and concrete figure! Nor can you perceive it this clearly. The entirety of my giant 'self' is nothing but a 'power' that doesn't even possess a will. Then why is it that I am here now as 'O' and possess a will? It's because 'a certain someone' has given shape to the being 'O' through a 'wish'."

"'A certain someone'...?"

What is 'O' talking about? That he was created by someone while also being a supernatural phenomenon?

"Let's try to think of a 'wish' that could achieve that. Right, how about this: 'I want to make everybody's wishes come true'."

"———!!"

Could it be...

Could it be that that "certain someone" is.....

Once again, I think about *what* 'O' is.

He's the distributor of 'boxes' and has lured several people near me into madness and doom. He's a being that grants false 'wishes'.

Therefore—

"I'm sure you have gotten it! That 'certain someone' isn't aware of it herself. She doesn't know that her 'box' works like that. She isn't aware of how she can grant someone else's 'wish'. But it's the truth!"

'O' mirrored what I had been thinking.

"Maria Otonashi's 'Flawed Bliss' is a 'box' that gives life to me, 'O'."

I have been expecting that answer, but still can't help feeling astonished when 'O' tells me face to face.

But I immediately shake my head.

"Nonsense. Maria wouldn't be able to do that."

"Don't misunderstand me: the being that grants 'wishes' has existed even before she first used her 'box'. Otherwise she wouldn't have been able to obtain the 'box' in the first place. She hasn't created me from scratch. What she did was simply give me shape and bring me to her side. Does that still seem impossible to you?"

"I—"

...I think it's possible. I have already seen things that are far more bizarre than that.

"But Maria told me that she has enclosed all of the people who used her 'Flawed Bliss'..."

"Have you ever seen it for yourself?"

"Eh?"

"You just took her word for it, didn't you? The word of an amnesiac who, whenever she lets someone use her 'box', loses all memories of that person and his or her environment."

".....But."

I actually felt it at the time. I touched Maria's chest and experienced the bottomless sorrow of the 'Flawed Bliss'. I caught sight of the people who she had enclosed.

"You seem unconvinced. But remember that you have also touched the 'box' of another 'owner'. Didn't you feel something similar when that happened?"

"Eh...?"

He's right. I did directly touch Mogi-san's 'Rejecting Classroom'.

"I guess you have figured out by yourself, but in reality, you're encountering a mental image that depicts how they perceive their 'box'."

That means that the place at the bottom of the sea I saw when I touched Maria's chest was just...

"What you felt when you touched her was just a mental image. To her, it's true that she has locked all users into her 'box'; after all, that's an important part in how the 'boxes' distort reality. It is not, however, the truth. That scenery merely shows how she is stung with remorse because she could only provide such an incomplete solution to the people she tried to save, even after empathizing with them and so deeply understanding their sorrows. Yes—"

'O' continues, maintaining that graceful countenance.

"Yes—that scenery is only a depiction of her despair."

I recall the place I saw back then.

A theater of sham happiness at the bottom of the cold, yet oh-so-bright sea. Someone was crying somewhere, surrounded and drowned out by unending laughter. It's a lonely battlefield where no one ever wins.

It's Maria's despair.

...Maria.

So in the end, I still want to save her!

"...So I was right," 'O' whispers when he sees my expression.

"What do you mean by that?"

But instead of answering me, 'O' only gazes at me.

Irritated by 'O', I complain about what has been bothering me all along.

"...'O', you are only talking about Maria, but didn't you intend to talk about me?"

"Please have some patience; first things first. But rest assured, we'll get to the point right away... Here's something new I want to confirm. The 'wish' of that 'certain someone' is to make everyone's wishes come true, which is why I, 'O', exist. However, 'boxes' are made to analyze a wish perfectly. Thus, they even grant the user's doubts. So in what form were the doubts of that 'certain someone' granted?"

"...I still have nothing to do with it, do I?"

"Oh, you do."

"Huh?"

"Recall Nana Yanagi, your first love."

That name has appeared so unexpectedly that I get flustered.

"...W-Why, her name just now?"

"Because that 'certain someone' used her 'box' on Nana Yanagi."

"———!!"

"Oh right, you didn't know that. Of course you're surprised. But you wanted me to get to the point already, right? I'm afraid I can't give you any time to calm down."

What a sarcastic monster.

"Well then, I don't know how *you* feel about it, but to Nana Yanagi you were a savior. You were of more help to her than anyone else, even her boyfriend Touji Kijima. Of course, 'she' who enclosed Nana Yanagi knew that. You made an intensive impression on 'her'. After all, it takes quite a lot to be considered a savior by someone. Therefore, 'she' unconsciously established a new rule inside her: Kazuki Hoshino has the makings of a savior."

"...That makes no sense to me."

"Is that so? But there's more! ...'She' had contradicting desires after seeing such a savior. On one hand, she wanted to grant 'wishes' whatever it takes, but on the other hand, she yearned for someone to stop her."

I've already known that. She told me about her true feelings inside the 'Game of Idleness'.

"The doubts about her 'wish' were compatible with the part of her that wishes for someone to stop her, so they combined. A 'box' grants wishes exactly as they are. In other words, the 'box' also granted her the self-contradictory conviction that a savior will come and crush her own 'wish'."

—What?

After perceiving me as a savior?

Meaning that the savior has received the power to crush 'wishes' from her 'box'?

"Haven't you ever wondered why you were able to retain your memories inside the 'Rejecting Classroom' when you weren't an 'owner'? Why you remained completely unaffected when Iroha Shindou over here stepped on your shadow? Wouldn't it be rather logical to assume that you have been under the influence of the 'Flawed Bliss' all along, and thus could resist the power of these 'boxes'?"

The 'Flawed Bliss' had two powers.

The power to create 'O'.

And the power to create the "savior".

"Her 'box' assigned you the role of a savior. Or should I say..."

"Kazuki Hoshino, you are the knight who must stop Maria Otonashi."

Knight.

I'm... Maria's knight.

I have gained that power from Maria herself?

"———"

I look at the palms of my hands. I close them, I open them. Closed, opened.
Rock, paper.

Ah... they're completely normal hands, unreliable and small compared to those of others my age. I feel no special power in them. Yet... I don't know why, but something feels odd. ...No, that's wrong.

It's the opposite.

—The feeling of oddness that's always lurked at the fringes of my consciousness has just disappeared.

"All right, now why don't you check to see if you really have received a power from the 'Flawed Bliss'?"

"Try out? How?" I ask.

'O' glances at Iroha-san as if he had only just recalled that she's also present, and answers without moving a muscle.

"Destroy her 'box' whether or not she wants you to."

"Wha——?!" Iroha-san exclaims and scowls at me.

You don't have to look like that at me. Why would I follow the instructions of someone like 'O', whom I hate so much? Even if I really had the power to destroy your 'box', I definitely wouldn't want to do it.

Despite that,

".....
.....Heh, hehe."

I can't help chuckling.

"Kazuki-kun...?"

Iroha-san contorts her face. But I can't stop laughing.

"Heh, hehe... a, ha, ahahahahaha!"

"...Wha? What's so funny?"

Oh wow, what is this feeling that comes welling up from deep within me?

What is this irrepressible urge?

—I want to test it.

—I want to test this power.

—I want to squash that 'box' that she's holding so dear.

Aah, I no longer feel that there's too little “self” inside me.

It was disgusting. I wondered why I felt that way and where that feeling came from. It was like I was swept along by some external force, like my will was controlled by that same powerful force. I had just experienced that phenomenon: even though I had just fallen into the depths of despair after I deemed it impossible to save Maria, those feelings were somehow swept aside so that I could try to find a solution by questioning Iroha-san.

Finally, I have an explanation.

Everything was set up by Maria.

It was all her fault. She played havoc with my life. Maria's 'box' is the root of all evil. It's her fault that I tried to stab Iroha-san, it's her fault that I was willing to let Mogi-san die as I destroyed her 'box', it's all Maria's fault.

I have been under Maria's control.

"Heh, ha, ahahahahahahahahaha, HAHA,
ha
ha
hahaha!"

And that—feels fucking great.

Because it means that I belong to her in the truest sense of the word. Of course it feels good when that's been my goal all along.

I used to feel guilty about trying to get rid of Aya Otonashi against Maria's will. For one thing, I didn't know whether that was the right thing to do, and for another thing, I didn't want to make her any sadder.

But now I've gotten Maria's permission.

I've obtained the justification to blow Aya to kingdom come.

It's okay for me to go and fulfill this dark desire.

Aah, Maria.

My beloved Maria.

No matter how much you hate me and how much you struggle and cry, I will destroy your 'box'. I will beat it to pulp. I will tear apart the painting you committed yourself to before your eyes. I will destroy it, crush it, devastate it, ravish it, smash it, and dispose of it.

Aah, my heart is pounding with joy. I'm breathing wildly because of the high that I'm on.

Superiority.

Dominion.

Omnipotence.

"...Are you okay, Kazuki-kun?" Iroha-san asks. She's noticed my wild breathing, and that I'm pressing my hand against my chest while squatting.

Yeah, indeed. Before I kill Aya Otonashi, I have to confirm that my power is real.

"W-Whoa... why are you glaring at me?"

And I'll use this 'box'-obsessed girl for that purpose.

—But how do I go about destroying a 'box'?

I try to think logically about possible methods... for an instant, but I doubt that that will get me anywhere. My gut is telling me that I should instead visualize my power.

Thus, I try to form an image in my mind.

I imagine myself as a knight in a blood-stained wasteland. A giant army of armored enemies with all sorts of weapons is standing in my way as far as the eye can reach. I pierce them with my longsword, create a mountain of corpses, and never stop killing even though it gives birth to hatred and resentment.

It's all for the sake of meeting Maria.

In order to rescue her from the castle that she is held captive in, I pile up the corpses to form a mountain of equal height. I climb the wobbling tower of flesh like a stairway in order to reach the trapped Maria.

To save her.

Aah.

"Aah."

I figured it out.

"I figured it out."

There was no sudden inspiration. I merely connected the pieces I've already found. It's like I randomly solved a puzzle ring^[3] without even thinking about it. With a feeling like that, I figured out—

—the 'boxes'.

—the right way to use a 'box'.

As soon as you think about how to use a 'box', you can't master it anymore. You have to keep yourself from filling the 'box' with your desires, and just become aware that it exists. All you have to do is realize that the power to grant 'wishes' does exist. We just have to believe in ourselves and aim for a goal.

The 'box' can stay empty. No, it must stay empty.

That's what I realized.

And that's enough. With that knowledge alone, I can obtain the knight's power to crush 'boxes'. I can obtain the tool that grants my wish—

'Utsuro no HakoThe Empty Box.'

"...Okay, let's do it then, shall we?"

I grab Iroha-san's face with my right hand, covering her eyes with my palm, and use my other hand to yank on her arm and pull her to the ground.

"Eh? Uh...?"

I sit down on top of her. Iroha-san looks at me with rounded eyes. Apparently, it's all happening too quickly for her.

Her slowness is fatal. It's too late already. Her defeat is set in stone.

Without missing a beat, I thrust my hand like a sword into her chest.

"EH? Ah! Gnn! ...Ungh!!"

And I take it out.

I take out the cheap imitation of the 'Shadow of Sin and Punishment'.

".....Eh? Eh? What?"

I smile triumphantly as I watch her struggle and fail to grasp the situation she's in.

What an easy victory.

It was that easy to remove someone's 'box'?

I look at the 'box'. It's hard and round, and jet-black like a cannonball, but I'm sure Daiya's 'box' looks different. The agony of its 'owner' radiates from the small 'box' in my hand, but I don't care about that.

"...Ah?" Only after seeing the object that I'm holding does Iroha-san realize what I've done to her. "Ah...! Aah!"

She's reacting as though I tore out her heart. She clutches her chest and looks up at me with an ashen face.

"What... what have you done?"

There's no need to explain the obvious.

I remain silent, and Iroha-san continues.

"H-How can you do something like removing a 'box'?!"

...Why, huh? How should I respond?

Because I'm the 'knight'. That would be the truth, but it would be meaningless to Iroha-san.

Then, how should I respond?

The first thing that comes to mind is what Daiya once said to me.

—Oh boy, Daiya sure is sharp. He's always spot-on with his analyses. I denied it back then, but he was right after all!

I close my eyes for a moment, and proclaim:

"Because I exist to trample others' 'wishes'."

In a sense, it's a declaration that I'm her enemy.

Her widened eyes are fixed on my face. After getting a glimpse of my expression, she moves her gaze down to the 'box' I'm holding in my hand.

After making this circuit several times, she finally realizes what I'm up to and grows even paler.

"Sto... Stop it! If you crush it, I'll!"

"There is no valid use for a 'box'."

"I have no other choice! After learning about it. After learning about a power that can perform miracles! I can't imagine living without it... I can't endure a life without 'boxes' anymore! Give it back to me!"

I see. Once you discover a loophole in reality, you can't live without it. I think 'O' once told me something similar. That means that merely learning about the 'boxes' has a tremendous impact.

It can't be helped. I have to teach her a lesson.

"What's the magic word?"

"Huh?"

"Beg for me to please, please refrain from crushing your 'box'! But prostrate yourself before me first."

"...What's wrong with you, Kazuki-kun? What's the point?"

"You're not even desperate enough to prostrate yourself? It must be a silly 'wish' then! You aren't prepared to swallow a bitter pill yourself, even though you're willing to sacrifice others?"

"You're evading my question!"

"Because I won't accept any questions from you! Come on, beg already!"

Apparently realizing that I'm serious, Iroha-san bites her lips.

"...You can't trick me. There's no guarantee that you won't crush my 'box' even if I abase myself."

"Of course there's no guarantee. But unless you prostrate yourself before me, I will crush this 'box' without fail. Don't be so choosy!"

She doesn't respond to me and instead looks at 'O'.

"It's futile! 'O' won't help you."

".....tch!"

"I know that making you prostrate yourself before me isn't a good idea. You could wait for a gap in my defenses and recover your 'box'. That's why you just looked at 'O' - because you're hoping that he might interfere and open that gap for you. But it's futile. The one telling me to test my power is 'O' himself, so he won't get in my way. And because I know that you're looking for a chink in my armor, I will not let my guard down."

"Ugh..."

"If you want to stop me from crushing your 'box', you have no other choice but to appeal to my better nature. Prostrating yourself might not be entirely

pointless, you know? I think crushing this 'box' is the right choice, but if you can convince me otherwise, I won't do it."

Technically, that's not a lie.

I don't think she can possibly change my mind, but if she somehow managed to do so, of course I wouldn't destroy her 'box'.

"....."

Iroha-san lapses into silence.

For a while, she doesn't move.

But eventually,

"U, uuuuuuh..."

She started crying.

Still lying on the ground, she overflows with tears. Like a helpless child begging for something, she overflows with tears and screws up her face.

And then she does as I said. She prostrates herself before me, touching her forehead to the ground.

Honestly, I'm surprised.

—That's Iroha-san? The strong-willed Iroha-san who cut off her own finger to reach her goals in the 'Game of Idleness'...?

"I beg you. Please, do not destroy it. Please, give it back to me," she says frantically with tears flowing from her eyes.

She's not blindly doing it because I commanded her, but because she knows that begging and prostrating herself is all she can do. Like a helpless child who knows that the adult abusing her won't stop until she weeps and cries.

I have brutally cornered Iroha-san.

There's no way my heart wouldn't ache at that sight.

"...Without it...without it... I can't live anymore..."

Iroha-san craves this 'box' like an addict.

She seriously believes that the 'box' is the support she requires. She thinks that she can't live without a 'box' anymore, and as a matter of fact, that might have become true after she found out about and started using it.

That's how those 'boxes' work.

They wreck people so that they can never return to who they were.

"...I heard you. You can no longer do without a 'box'. If you lose it, a deep wound in your heart will remain."

"...Yes. So please, give it back to me. I'll do whatever you want..."

As I grieve over the sight of Iroha-san's crying fit, I hold the 'box' in front of her face.

She must have believed that I wouldn't return it so readily, so she looks at me with surprise. Seeing my gentle smile and the 'box' before her eyes, her face loosens with relief.

"T-Thank you..." she says gratefully as she reaches out with greedy hands.

"Thank you?" I incline my head. "Even though I'm telling you that I will wound you mortally?"

"Eh?"

"You can't possibly think that I'd ever return this to you?" I say as I crush her 'box'.

A black secretion squirts between my fingers as if I had just squashed a giant insect, staining my hand and her face.

Iroha-san's face freezes as if time stood still while she was bathed in the remnants of her own 'box'.

She touches her face and traces it again and again to understand what just happened. Over and over, she confirms that the 'box' has been destroyed with her trembling fingers- unwilling to believe in its destruction, even though it's all too real.

"Uh, ah—"

At last, she accepts the truth.

[illegible]

Either because crushing the 'box' also had a direct effect on her body, or out of pure psychic shock, Iroha-san's eyes roll up in her head and she passes out.

"Whew," I sigh while looking down at her.

Some weeping and some begging?

Are you kidding me?

I expected things to play out this way. I even expected that I would be saddened to a certain extent while watching her beg. Therefore, if there had

been a way to touch my heart and convince me not to destroy her 'box', it definitely wasn't begging and appealing to my sense of pity. Instead, she should have stood up for her ideals despite her desperation, and confronted me with overwhelming strength of will in spite of her hopeless situation.

If Iroha-san had still been in her right mind, she would have done exactly that, and perhaps convinced me to reconsider my stance on the 'boxes'.

But she wasn't able to do so. The old Iroha-san would never have prostrated herself and passed out. She's lost her sense of self to a ridiculous degree.

Isn't that proof that she danced to the bidding of her 'box' and that it only made things worse for her?

That's why I showed her the destruction of her 'box' in such graphic detail. I taught her that she won't ever be able to regain her 'box'.

I don't know if she will be able to recover from this; it's unlikely, to be honest. But it's better than letting her obtain a new 'box' and go on making mistakes. It's way better than having her hurt others because of her fucked up beliefs. Iroha-san will have to accept living without a 'box'.

If you can't, Iroha-san, go die in a fire and don't get in my way.

"It's evident now," 'O' says to me while I'm looking down at her. "You have definitely been influenced by the 'Flawed Bliss'. You have gained the power of a 'knight'."

"Seems so," I respond and look at 'O'.

The expression on the face of this uber-pretty version of 'O' isn't the one of calm that I'm accustomed to. It's a vacuous expression similar to that of a doll. And just as a doll crafted too masterfully looks more uncanny than beautiful^[4], the hollow expression on that perfect-looking girl disgusts me.

Ah—I see.

Subconsciously, I have seen through his... no, her true nature all along, and that's why she always disgusted me so much.

Exactly. I suddenly remember now. When I saw her in that scene that I could only remember in my dreams, she looked exactly as she does now.

That's what 'O' really looks like.

And that's the expression she displays in her true form.

That means that she has finally decided to directly confront me.

"Kazuki-kun. I once said that our goals are the same. But it seems like that statement was correct from one perspective, but wrong from another. We

both act and exist for Maria Otonashi's sake. We're the same in that respect. But while I exist to grant her 'wish', you exist to destroy it. While our actions are equally grounded in her being, our roles are the exact opposite. Jeez, what a shame considering that I still feel that we're alike. I'll have to suppress these feelings of familiarity. Because after all, we are—"

"You're right. We are—"

Enemies.

Neither of us bothers to actually spell it out.

There was no need to.

I will defeat 'O'.

That's equivalent to recovering the zeroth Maria. These two goals are linked.

"But I'm afraid to say that you won't be able to win this fight, Kazuki-kun. It may be easy to get rid of me because you need only crush the 'Flawed Bliss' like you just did with Iroha Shindou's 'box'. But while doing so ensures my defeat, it does not ensure your victory. By simply destroying it," she looks down at Iroha-san, "you might destroy Maria Otonashi's personality the way you did with this girl - or worse. Iroha Shindou might be able to recover, but it's definitely impossible for Maria Otonashi. She already has to brace herself to her very limits in order to hold herself together. The equilibrium is so unstable that losing her 'box' will cause a chain reaction that will break her completely. I'm sure you are well aware of that, but just to be clear: if you forcibly crush her 'box', her heart will definitely break to pieces and there will be no hope for recovery."

I don't want to admit it, but I think 'O' is right.

I cannot save Maria by simply destroying her 'box'. If I do that, she will collapse while still possessed by the "Aya Otonashi" she created, and never recover.

There's no point if she doesn't want to abandon her 'box' by herself.

But that is—

"It's impossible," 'O' says as if she had read my mind. "Because you betrayed her, she has made up her mind once and for all. You understand what that means, don't you? It means that she won't give up her 'box' on her own. The strength of her will is so great that she won't even flinch when her life is at stake. You have witnessed that countless times, so you know that only too well, don't you?"

Right, I have witnessed them all too well.

How Maria couldn't use force in even when she was about to be killed. How she couldn't sacrifice anyone because she wants to make everyone happy.

To destroy her 'box' for her own sake.

Maria would never accept that. She would never act for her own selfish happiness. I gave in to despair too early, thinking that there was no way to save her.

However.

"I can do it!"

I've learned that I'm the savior.

I've learned that I'm the 'knight'.

"Maria will definitely yield her 'box' to me!"

I don't know how I can achieve my goal, but I can still believe in my own power now that I've finally accepted my 'box'.

This power was created by Maria herself because she wished for it, so there's no way I can fail.

I will perform a miracle that will turn everything on its head.

"Because I have the 'Empty Box' with me now."

Nothing can stop me now.

Mm...first off, I'll recover Maria from Daiya. After that, I'll fight Maria herself and make her give up her 'box'.

"I see. Then I shall destroy the 'Empty Box'."

'O' will definitely become my enemy.

...Ah, only now did I recognize the true identity of 'O'. I have finally noticed after realizing that she's my enemy.

Why didn't I notice such an obvious thing sooner? I should have recognized her much sooner. At the very least, I should have been able to perceive it once I saw her current form.

I mean, didn't I think that they looked alike when I first saw her?

'O'

It's just an initial. Maria has created this being, so I suppose that she subconsciously gave it the name 'O', which she was familiar with anyway. If that's the case, there's only one meaning to the name that I can think of.

She wanted to become a being that grants others' wishes. And in a sense, 'O' is exactly that. —In a sense, 'O' is her ideal.

And there's the name of the person Maria is trying to become by stifling her own self.

Yes, their roots were the same. That's why I consider them both my enemies.

I call out the name of 'O' with deep hostility.

"O'Aya Otonashi"

I don't know the origins of that name. Maybe there was an actual person who served as an inspiration. It's *Otonashi*, so maybe it was a member of Maria's family.

What I know is that both of us, 'O' and I, exist for the sake of Maria.

But we cannot coexist. Since we oppose each other from the very depths of our respective beings, only one of us can survive. But I absolutely will not lose.

So I make my intent just as absolutely clear.

"I will kill you, 'Aya Otonashi.'"

Author's Notes

Long time no see, this is Eiji Mikage.

At last, I was able to release the fifth installment of "Utsuro no Hako to Zero no Maria." While it is true that I was busy with another project plus another series, I deeply regret that it took me two years to get here. I tried to make sure that the readers who have completely forgotten what this series is about can still follow the story, so please don't worry about that.

Speaking of which, I feel like my Author's Notes always need a similar apology... I love writing novels almost too much, so I have a hunch that I may be on the verge of finally getting the knack of writing faster. Maybe.

Err... Truth be told, I was aware that this volume would be hard to write when I finished the fourth volume. Not because of the subject matter, but because I felt that I lacked energy to keep writing this series. You may think that I'm just coming up with a sketchy rationalization. I actually agree. But thanks to my recharged batteries, I put much more of *you-know-what* into this volume. I took out my stress on all the characters - it didn't matter who it was, I just totally messed everyone up.

Well, about the content of this book: this time there are two protagonists.

To tell you the truth, I've wanted to write a Daiya-centric volume even from the earliest stages of plotting out this series. In fact, I originally wanted to make a character like Daiya the protagonist. It would have been easier for me that way as well.

But when taking the overarching concept of this series and other details into account, I reached the conclusion that it was better to refrain from doing so. It couldn't be helped.

However, since the first volume I have been secretly (even in secret from my previous editor) working in all kinds of details, thinking "hah! I'll make Daiya stand out someday and make him tear strips off Kazuki!" That's also why the other major characters are Daiya's childhood friends and not Kazuki's. This way, Kazuki has entered their community and not the other way round.

So with this volume, I have achieved the goal that I set for myself at the time. The story is nearing its end, but it looks like I will be able to include everything that I wanted to, and not just what I had in mind for Daiya. That makes me really happy.

On to the thank-you note.

Thanks again to my editor Miki-san. Let's continue to enjoy writing novels together.

Thanks to Tetsuo-san for drawing such neat illustrations despite the long gap between volumes. You seem to like this story, and that really inspires me a lot.

Finally, dear readers. The many voices that asked for a sequel who became a powerful motivation. Thank you so much. I am still inexperienced as a writer, but please bear with me.

Well then, let's meet again soon!

--Eiji Mikage

Translators Notes and References

1. Jump up↑ A thick sauce is manufactured in Japan under brand names such as 'Bulldog', which reflect its English origins, but this is a brown sauce more similar to HP Sauce rather than any type of Worcestershire Sauce.
 2. Jump up↑ Umaibō (うまい棒) or "delicious stick" is a small, puffed, cylindrical corn snack that resides at the bottom of most Japanese convenience store candy shelves.
 3. Jump up↑ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Junior, Senior %26 Big League Baseball](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Junior,_Senior_%26_Big_League_Baseball)
 4. Jump up↑ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koshien Stadium](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koshien_Stadium)
 5. Jump up↑ See Volume 2, wherein she shattered a window with her sneakers.
 6. Jump up↑ In the original Japanese, the message was well within Twitter's 140 character limit: "Second-year student Kazuki Hoshino and first-year student Maria Otonashi (of XX high school) have disappeared. At 6pm today, Kazuki's sister found his last will and testament and searched for him to no avail. Should you spot them, report to us. His address: [...]"
 7. Jump up↑ ~1.3 million US\$
 8. Jump up↑ The spelling "just desserts" is commonly seen but is incorrect. <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/just-deserts.html>
 9. Jump up↑ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puzzle ring](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puzzle_ring)
 10. Jump up↑ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncanny valley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncanny_valley)
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